Stories and Tales from a Beautiful Bygone Era

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By: Mohammed Zakaria Tawfik

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Introduction

I began this book without knowing how it would end. It is neither a short story, nor a historical research work, nor a social study, nor even an autobiography. Rather, it is a mixture of all these things. It is simply memories of a beautiful era that has passed and will never return. I feared that oblivion would erase them and that they would vanish into the dust of what once was. It is the history that history neglected, relying solely on my memory. Events I witnessed myself and stories I heard from and about the people closest to me. They are all true stories—unless memory has failed me.

I may be more fortunate than many readers, for in my childhood I lived through the days of King Farouk. In my adolescence and youth, I witnessed the eras of President Mohamed Naguib and President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Later, I emigrated and lived in the United States during the presidencies of Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, Adly Mansour, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. During that time, I closely followed the historical and social transformations taking place in Egypt through both local and foreign newspapers.

This is the period of the 1940s and 1950s, when Egypt was beautiful and everything in it was beautiful. It was an era of beauty from which nothing remains except its fragrant memory. I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Mohammed Zakaria Tawfik

1

My father worked as a junior employee at the Agricultural Credit Bank. He traveled between the villages and hamlets of Sharqia Governorate, accompanied by our small family: my mother, my father, and me.

We lived in the mud-brick houses of the peasants, roofed with wood, consisting of one or two rooms and a small courtyard. There was no running water, no electricity, and no sewage system. I lived close to the bottom of Egyptian society and observed it closely.

The first thing I remember about my grandfather's house is the golden rays of light emanating from a glass kerosene lamp, a number five. A crowd of chicks filled a sieve placed next to the lamp. I was put with the laundry in a basket to keep me from falling over.

I could hear the deep notes of an oud coming from the living room, played by my uncle, who was ten years younger than my father. How old was I then? Maybe one or two. Can our memories travel back so many years? Yes.

The second thing I remember is finding a large red wasp dying in front of the house. I decided to catch

it with an onion peel. But the insect was still alive and stung my finger. My father took me to the barber to get some ointment to ease the pain. Could an onion peel protect us from wasp stings? Childish thinking.

I had a particular fondness for fezzes. My grandfather, uncles, maternal uncles, and father all wore them. I was always playing with my grandfather's fez and plucking at the button. My father would scold me for playing with it, but my grandfather enjoyed watching me turn it over and pull out the inner lining.

My father bought me a small fez so I would stay away from my grandfather's. It was Eid al-Fitr. I went to ride the swings for the holiday. I liked the duck swing. It was a rectangular wooden box, fixed in the middle, with its two short sides rising and falling sequentially.

I kept riding that cursed swing until my Eid money ran out. What could I do? As the singer Sharifa Fadel said, "The one who loves it gets what he deserves." I exchanged the fez for a ride.

I asked the swing operator to put me on and take the fez. The swing operator knew my grandfather. He told him the news and the scandals. My grandfather, may God have mercy on him, kept reminding me of this incident until he passed away.

We had a large Philips radio that ran on a 12-volt liquid battery, the kind used in cars. The battery was charged at the village flour mill, so it would only last a few hours.

I remember the sharp, whistling sound that came between shortwave stations when my grandfather was searching for the BBC to listen to the news. I also remember the antenna that stretched the length of the roof to pick up the shortwaves.

My grandfather used to say, "I didn't live to see the British occupation of Egypt. May God grant me a long life so I can see them leave." God granted his wish. The British left in 1954, and my grandfather died in 1964.

On summer nights, you would find farmers, men and women, gathering in front of our window to listen to Omm Kalthoum at her monthly concert on the first Thursday of every month, singing "Salu Ku'us al-Tala" or "Reem 'ala al-Qa', bayn al-Ban wa al-'Alamy, ahl safk dami, fi al-ushr al-haramy”

These peasants don't know the meaning of the words "Reem," "Ban," or "Alamy", but they do know that there is a serious art being told by Omm Kalthoum, one that deserves to be heard and heeded. A rural woman came to visit my

grandmother, and when she heard Mohamed Abdel Wahab's songs on the radio, she said, "Your radio is much better than my daughter's husband's." When my grandmother asked her why, she said, "Because it plays better songs.

Cotton bollworms would gather around the kerosene lamps and lanterns that lit the village streets, and the peasant children would gather beneath them to play and talk on hot summer nights.

Meanwhile, my father's salary was three pounds a month, a considerable sum that made him eligible to marry my mother, since her family was wealthy in the countryside, while my father was poor.

My father found a great opportunity to work at a fertilizer company for a salary of four pounds. But because of the outbreak of World War II, the company went bankrupt and laid him off. He remained unemployed, married with a child, for two years. He then returned to work at the Credit Bank through one of the old-time Pashas.

My father used to receive an allowance of one piaster a day while he was unemployed. He would take it to the coffee shop to spend some time. This coffee shop still exists in our town, but its original owner is different from its current one.

One night, it was pitch black due to a German air raid on Lower Egypt during World War II. A peasant came in asking for a cup of tea. But tea was scarce during the war.

The owner of the coffee shop decided to make a cup of hibiscus tea instead, thinking the peasant wouldn't notice in the darkness. As soon as the peasant took his first sip, he jumped up, shouting angrily, "Who told you to squeeze lemon on it?”

Ezzat Qadri, a shy and modest young musician, fell in love with a peasant girl. He asked Sheikh Muhammad to mediate and discuss the matter of marriage with the girl's family.

Sheikh Muhammad asked him: “are you ready and have the dowry money?"
Ezzat Qadri replied:
"Yes, I've saved 20 pounds"
Okay, bring them here, and may God do what is best." Wait here on the bridge until I convince the bride's family.

Izzat Qadri remained on the bridge until he was shivering from the cold on that bitterly cold winter day. Time dragged on until midnight. There was still no sign of Sheikh Muhammad. After a while, he found him returning with heavy steps.
”So, Sheikh Muhammad, did they agree?”

No answer.
“Did they agree, Sheikh Muhammad?”
Again, no answer.
“Why aren't you answering? You're worrying me.”
“You bother me, be quiet. They only agreed for me as a husband with great difficulty."
“My God, did you marry her, Sheikh Muhammad?”
“Yes.”
“What about my money?”
“You can take it when I get it.”

My grandmother's brother was fond of repairing pocket watches and old alarm clocks. He had unsuccessful attempts to turn copper into gold. One day, he came to visit my grandmother with an old pocket watch.

He couldn't wait to go home, so he sat in the middle of my grandmother's courtyard and asked for a pot lid. He squatted down, with the lid on the dirt floor in front of him. With a cup of tea, he took the watch apart with a small screwdriver, placing its delicate parts in the lid in a specific order, which would help him reassemble it later after cleaning and oiling it.

So that my grandmother could do her duty towards her visiting brother, she opened the door of the coop and chased after a rooster to prepare it for dinner. But the rooster was trying to escape for its life, because life is precious to all creatures, even roosters.

The rooster kept running here and there, and my grandmother was after it with a knife. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Hopp jumped into the pot lid, and the precise parts of the clock scattered everywhere on the dusty floor.

At my grandmother's house, when the wind died down and silence fell, you could hear the train. And if you stood in front of the house, you could see the sails of boats passing by on the river, appearing in the distance between the palm trees.

As a young child, whenever I heard the train or saw the sails of boats, I was overcome with a deep sadness for no apparent reason. Did my subconscious mind foresee that I would spend most of my life away from my country? Perhaps.

A simple farmer lost his daughter and, with her, his mind. He filled his yard with bricks and pebbles and began throwing them into the air, shouting, "Couldn't you find anyone else to take but my daughter?" People ran after him, saying, "Man, have mercy! You've blasphemed!" But he continued throwing stones and pebbles.

Another farmer had his son kidnapped by bandits demanding a ransom. When the thieves' message reached him, he replied, "Let them take him. At least I'll be rid of him." The thieves left the child the

next day.

A small child, whose clothes spoke of abject poverty and whose skin was pale with signs of severe malnutrition, approached. A passerby gave him a piece of candy. The child took the candy and went to a group of children who had been watching him from afar. He divided the candy among them, so that each of them received a small portion. Would this happen now.

For a farmer, a cow is everything. The farmer depends on it for food and for working the fields. A cow was walking along the edge of a well when it fell in.

The farmers who were nearby rushed to the scene and tried to save the cow, but to no avail. They tried to find its owner, but they couldn't find any trace of him.

When they were certain the cow was about to die, they slaughtered it and sold its meat among themselves. Then they collected the proceeds in a box, keeping it safe until the owner appeared. Would we do that now?

There were some thieves who wanted to break into the house of an old peasant woman at night. While she slept, they broke into the house and ransacked

every corner, searching for anything of value. Exhausted from their search, they found nothing but the house's storeroom of stale bread.

The old woman sensed an unusual movement, so she awoke and opened her bedroom door, only to see, in the moonlight, a group of rascals squatting in the courtyard, eating her dry bread.

She returned to her room to prepare a dish filled with cream, placed it before her guests and children, wished them well, and went back to sleep. The thieves were astonished by the woman's courage and generosity and decided to leave her some money as a token of their deep gratitude.

My earliest memory of school is of my first experience at a primary school in the village of Al-Samakin in Sharqia. I wasn't officially enrolled because of my young age. I attended classes as an unregistered student.

so I wasn't given lunch. The teacher would give me some of the food meant for absent students. If no one was absent, the teacher would take some bread and dip from the other students and give it to me.

From time to time, the teacher would ask us to bring a handful of grain—wheat, corn, or dried beans—ostensibly to teach us counting, addition, and

subtraction. The proceeds from this grain went to the teacher at the end of each lesson.

The mayor of the village of Al-Samakin was one of the wealthiest men in the countryside, owning hundreds of acres of the finest farmland. On many occasions, he would hold a grand feast, inviting all the officers, soldiers, and guards of the police, as well as the workers of the health units, teachers, employees of the Credit Bank, and other government employees.

He would bring cooks and waiters from the city, and even musical bands—the fire brigades, for all fire brigades at that time were skilled musicians and worked as bands for pay, and on national holidays, without pay, when there were no fires to extinguish.

Animals would be slaughtered, the ground swept, sprinkled with water, and covered with fine white sand. Tables would be laid out with white cloths, and upon them would be placed meat, turkeys, ducks, chickens, pigeons, oven-baked casseroles of freekeh and rice pudding, pies, feteer, all kinds of sweets, fruits, nuts, iced water scented with rosewater and orange blossom, juices, and other beverages.

The dry season would come in winter, and the canals would dry up. The riverbed is visible, save for small patches where fish struggle to survive. The

Ministry of Irrigation used to dredge and deepen the canals, removing silt during the dry season.

For us children, it was a whole other world, an exciting and unparalleled experience, a joy we witnessed every year. Whether it was during the dry season or when the flood came and the river was full of silt and bounty, turning the water red—the color of life—it was a constant presence.

2

The village where I was born is an agricultural village in the eastern Delta. Nothing distinguishes it from the other villages. Perhaps this is the secret of its beauty and charm. To its east, a small canal runs parallel to a railway line, alongside which telephone and telegraph poles stretch. Each pole bears a unique identification card in the form of numbers, specifying its location. They are arranged at equal intervals, like border guards trying to prevent a beautiful era from escaping and migrating from the country forever.

To the west of the village, a larger canal stretches, lined with willow, eucalyptus, and tamarisk trees. The locals call it the sea. A bridge spans it for pedestrians and animals, and another bridge carries a small train called "Suares." This train connects this village to another village not served by the first railway line.

Suares is different from Sawiris. The former is the family name of the brothers Felix, Joseph, and Raphael Suares. They came to Egypt at the end of the 19th century, and Raphael Suares was the economic advisor to Khedive Abbas Hilmi II. As for Sawiris, he is the well-known

Egyptian businessman Naguib Sawiris, owner of Orascom Telecommunications and Technology.

The Suares brothers had a distinguished economic presence in Egypt. Among their achievements was the establishment of the Suares Railway network in 1889, connecting villages and hamlets throughout the Delta and Upper Egypt. These were small-scale railways, unlike the current large-scale railway network, which began with the Cairo-Alexandria line during the reign of Abbas Hilmi I in the mid-19th century.

The Suares brothers also established horse-drawn carriages in Cairo, known as the Suares Carriages, and extended the railway line between Bab al-Louq and Helwan. They also developed tourist facilities and services in the Helwan district and electrified Cairo's streets for the first time in 1899, before many European cities. They were also responsible for developing the Maadi district in Cairo.

Following Raphael Suares's advice to Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, the government-run "Dar al-Saniyya" (a government department that functioned similarly to the public sector during the Nasser era) was abolished and privatized. The Aswan and Qena dams were built on the Nile to generate electricity and expand agricultural land.

It's worth noting that Talaat Harb, the great economist who founded Bank Misr and numerous other national companies, was a disciple of the Suares brothers, who left Egypt long ago and whose history has faded into obscurity.

All the villagers were farmers, living in mud-brick houses with roofs of wood and palm trunks. These houses hadn't changed since the time of the ancient Egyptians. I once asked my grandfather, "Grandpa, how did you build this house?" He replied simply:

"I invited your grandfather Arafa, your grandfather Tawfik, your grandfather Mustafa, and two neighbors. We made a mud dough-making process here and mixed it with straw." He pointed to the front of the house. "Then we built the house in a few days. When your father got married, we added the second story." This house has stood for over eighty years. There is no housing crisis, only a lack of resourcefulness and a crisis of intellect.

In front of the house was a vacant government-owned plot of land, more than a feddan in size, followed by fields stretching all the way to the river. In the summer, all the windows of the house and the main door were exposed to the cold northerly winds coming from Europe.

Upon entering the house, you find a hall, and on your right is the "mandara" or guest room. It has four windows: two facing the main street, and two facing a side alley.

To the left is a bathroom, which the farmers call "al-Kneif" or "the restroom." It has two doors, one for guests and the other for the household. A small front passage leads to a second hall. To the right is a room called a "maq'ad" (sitting room) containing a traditional oven and a small ventilation opening for smoke.

This oven is not used for baking but for heating during the bitterly cold winter days; it is called "al-furn al-jawani" (the inner oven). To the left is another room with a similar oven and a small ventilation opening. At the end of the hall is the barn and the main traditional oven used for baking, called "al-furn al-barani" (the outer oven). An internal staircase leads to the second floor.

On the second floor are five rooms called "maq'ad." Two of these rooms open onto the north front, and two onto the side alley. The fifth room opens onto the open-air inner hall, called "al-hadir," which is used as a storage room.

In winter, when the cold intensifies, a fire is lit in one of the ovens in the halls. The ventilation opening and door are opened to allow smoke to escape, and then closed to

retain heat.

After sunset, the hall is covered with mats, and the "tabliya" is placed on top. It's a short, round table around which the family gathers, squatting, to eat. The word "tabliya" is derived from the English word "table."

After dinner, by the light of a kerosene lamp casting its orange glow, the adults gather to talk and tell stories, and to drink tea and coffee with pastries and sweets. The children play or do their homework. Then, each of us happily takes our notebook to our grandfather, and we wait until the evening prayer so we can show him our great achievements at school.

No television, no radio, no telephone, no internet. The most beautiful and happiest days of our childhood were those we spent in the embrace of our family, at my grandparents' house, and when my aunt and her children would come over for dinner and spend the night with us.

One of the games we used to play while sitting was with our legs stretched out. Then one of us begins counting the legs while saying:
"Hejili bijili
kaman joljili

ya Bab El-Sayed
ya manqoush

ya habek el-emma
ala al-tarboush
ya khoufi minnik ya Sa'da
markoub el-khayl belah edda
hentesh bintesh
yalli tentesh.”

Whoever finishes counting bends his leg. We then repeat this for the remaining legs until we reach one leg, whose owner is the winner.

It is clear from the words of the game that its history dates back to the Crusades. Bab al-Sayyid probably refers to the shrine of Sayyid al-Badawi, and “Ya khufi mink ya Sa’da” all refer to war and hunting. Sa’da appears in the Hilali epic as follows:

“When famine struck Najd, Abu Zayd and his followers went to Tunisia in search of fertile land. Upon arriving in Tunisia and coming into contact with the Berbers, Sa’da, the daughter of Zenati Khalifa, fell in love with Marri, one of Abu Zayd’s companions. This sparked wars between the Hilali and Zenati tribes, culminating in the death of Zenati Khalifa. The Hilali then quarreled amongst

themselves over the division of Zenati Khalifa's possessions. War broke out between Abu Zayd and Diab, ending with Diab killing Abu Zayd."

I only felt truly safe, warm, and alive in the fullest sense during those happy days, which are gone and will never return. The heroes of this story have vanished, or nearly so. We are now shrouded in our worries and troubles, until we can see nothing before us.

Modernity and urban life have taken so much from us: the warmth, love, and care of family. We have become islands isolated from one another. We exist together in the same place, but our minds, souls, and hearts are far apart. We communicate from a distance, we befriend from a distance, we love and hate from a distance.

With the break of dawn, the sound of church bells blends in perfect harmony with the call to prayer from the mosques—a call to every lost soul, a balm for every tormented spirit. White doves bathe in the golden sunlight, play the morning ballet on the distant horizon, amidst towers, minarets, and trees—a cosmic symphony of exquisite tenderness and beauty.

The farmer wakes before dawn. As Bayram Al-Tunisi says, he wakes to rouse the roosters. He performs the dawn

prayer, then leads his animal from the pen, places the plow on it, and puts his trust in God. He pulls the animal behind him to the field. All the farmers go to their fields at the same time.

The streets are crowded in the morning. The fumes escape with exhalation and coughing, and from the mouths of livestock on bitterly cold winter days. Peasant women and young girls run after the buffalo to collect dung in their baskets. They mix it with straw and spread it out in the sun to form discs, to be used as fuel for cooking or as insulation on the roofs of houses. Nothing is wasted.

The scene repeats itself at sunset when the farmers return from the fields. One day, at sunset, I stood by the bridge counting the buffalo returning from the fields. I counted 150, then grew tired of counting and stopped.

Insecticides were unknown. The cotton bollworm was fought by hand. DDT wasn’t known until the 1950s.

Therefore, malignant diseases weren’t as widespread as they are now. But the farmers suffered from schistosomiasis, ascariasis, and intestinal parasites. These diseases were endemic due to the lack of clean drinking water.

These diseases were easily treatable and controlled. Epidemics like cholera decimated the farmers. And when an epidemic spread, transportation was disrupted. Each village would become completely isolated from its neighbors for days or months. Had it not been for its self-sufficiency and lack of need for the city, its inhabitants would have starved.

A farmer would only go to the hospital once, and that was the last time. He would be carried on an animal, supported on both sides by relatives. When you heard that “Abu Mustafa was taken to the hospital,” you expected to be offering condolences soon.

The peasant woman was completely self-sufficient. She raised chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons, and rabbits. She made cheese and butter from buffalo milk. She would take her harvest of eggs, cheese, butter, and any unwanted birds to the market to sell and buy what the household needed: sugar, tea, coffee, soap, tobacco, and molasses for her husband.

The peasant woman had the year’s harvest of wheat and corn, and she baked bread at home, not buying baladi bread or French bread. Baladi bread was called “special bread” because of its scarcity and was only sold on market days, along with falafel, as a temporary food source for the

vendors. The peasant women would jokingly say:
“Who do you love, Bahana? – I love Sheikh Ali.”
“What should he bring you, Bahana? – Falafel and soft bread.”

When a peasant woman bake bread, all her fellow peasant women help out. They assist with the dough, shaping, heating, and baking. The dough is made in large earthenware pots called “laqan.” This task is carried out by young women from the household and neighbors, as it requires considerable physical effort. The dough is mixed with yeast through kneading and rolling. The yeast is usually taken from previously fermented dough belonging to a neighbor. The process of obtaining the yeast is very important and is called “khamirah” (dough).

The dough is left to rest overnight before baking. The woman who bakes is called a baker, and she is often a skilled baker. The woman who shapes the bread sits next to the baker to receive the rising dough and place it on the baking mat, one loaf at a time. A third woman sits near the lower oven opening to supply the oven with firewood or to cool the fire by sprinkling water on it when it gets too hot. The firewood used is cottonwood, called Indian firewood, or cornwood, called Syrian firewood.

The baking mat is usually made of palm fronds in the

shape of a relatively large circle with a handle. The baker spreads the loaf on the baking mat, places it in the oven, and removes it when it's cooked. A piece of cloth, moistened with water and placed on top of an iron skewer, is used to clean the oven floor. This cloth is called a "maslaha," and I don't know the origin of this name. It probably varies from one region to another.

After baking, she prepares pies, feteer, feteer meshaltet (a type of Egyptian pastry), freekeh casseroles, rice puddings, and fish casseroles. In the fire left over from baking, she cooks fava beans and lentils and roasts potatoes. While baking, a young girl distributes the baked bread to the neighbors, and the neighbors do the same when they bake.

My grandmother used to bake inside her house. She also raised pigeons, chickens, and ducks. She had jars of old cheese, each several years old. The old cheese was golden yellow in color and tasted and felt like butter.

She kept bees in a coop on the second floor of her house. The beekeeper would come to collect the honey and wax once or twice a year. This is how Egyptian women have been for thousands of years—the greatest economic minds history has ever known. When we look at the Great Pyramid and Egyptian civilization, we must also look at the

Egyptian woman who was behind this great civilization.

This woman, my grandmother, educated her two sons at a time when no one sent their children to school because the fields needed them. She was illiterate. But she possessed extraordinary intelligence and immense pride. I used to see my father and my uncle, who worked as an engineer for the telephone company, turn to her for advice and counsel in times of trouble and hardship. And her opinions were always sound.

One day, my father asked one of his relatives to buy a sack of rice. When the sack of rice arrived at our house and my grandmother learned of it, she immediately asked my father, “Have you given him the money?” My father replied, “No. When I see him, I will give him the money.” My grandmother immediately said, “Go now to his house and give him the money.” My father, who was drinking tea, left it and rushed out to his relative’s house to give him the money for the sack of rice.

This remarkable woman lived alone in her house at the edge of town after her sons and daughters married and my grandfather passed away. When I visited Egypt several years ago, I asked to visit her grave to recite the Fatiha. I found it alone, also located at the end of the cemetery, with a cactus tree beside it and green fields in front of it,

just like the house she had left behind.

During the day, the village was almost completely deserted, except for a small child playing or a woman pouring laundry water in the street. In the late afternoon, the scent of smoke, cooking pots, and stuffed cabbage wafted from afar.

At sunset, as the farmers returned from the fields, a man in a djellaba would arrive on a bicycle, carrying a wooden ladder on his shoulder, to light the street lamps. After dinner, the village streets emptied of people. The only sounds were the night watchmen calling to one another.

When I walked beside my father at night, I could see the shadows cast by these lamps on the ground, their length and dimming depending on how close or farther away they were from the light source.

The sky was studded with diamonds and silver. There was no pollution, no fog, no dark clouds. The moon shimmered in the sky, following you wherever you went and stopping when you stood still, as if eager to be your friend. During a lunar eclipse, the peasant women would beat drums and tin cans, chanting: “

O our moon, O copper plate, O light upon all people,

O maidens of Paradise, let the moon revolve,
O daughters of Heaven, let the moon rejoice."

This town has not changed its customs and traditions since ancient times. It was said that if Noah were to return, he would recognize it at first sight, for it has never changed. They still eat fish every Friday, a custom that has remained since the time when Egypt was Christian, before the arrival of Islam.

On Sunday, known as "Palm Sunday" or "Front Sunday," the peasants would decorate their homes with palm fronds, weaving the leaves into hearts and making rings. They would also make dolls and combs from green wheat stalks, hanging them on the walls and doors of their houses and leaving them for the following year.

The following Monday was "Porridge Monday," when porridge was prepared and eaten on Tuesday to rid the house of the "bad blood of winter." On Wednesday, known as "Job's Wednesday," bodies were rubbed with the plant "Ra'ra'", and bathwater was sprinkled in front of the house. Or the men would go to bathe in the river early in the morning.

On Thursday, known as "Thursday of the Covenant" or

“Thursday of Lentils,” lentils were cooked and eaten that same day. Women would go to the cemetery early in the morning to visit the graves of their deceased, distributing alms and pastries called “qubburi,” named after the graves.

Quran reciters would gather in front of the graves for a small fee or to receive some of the alms pastries. Among them were poor and needy students.

One day, a reciter arrived late and found only a poor old peasant woman in front of one of the graves. He looked in the basket in front of her and found only one small pastry left. He quickly left it and began searching among the graves for other visitors, but he found no one but this old woman. Realizing that his recitation and effort would be in vain, he approached her and said, “Will you give it to me with Surah Al-Ikhlas (the shortest Sura)?”

Friday was called “Sad Friday,” and pastries were eaten with boiled eggs. On Holy Saturday, peasant women would come to my grandmother’s house to have their young children’s eyes lined with kohl to protect them from eye diseases. Farmers would plant sycamore trees, believing that whoever planted a tree on this day would be granted life for the entire year.

On Easter Sunday, people would wear new clothes and eat stuffed grape leaves. Lupin, fenugreek, and broad bean seeds would be sown. Strands of thin willow and eucalyptus branches would be hung to decorate doors and windows. Green onions, wheat stalks, and aromatic plants are hung. The hands of children and women are dyed with henna.

The boys make a scarecrow-like puppet. They wear a robe and place a long stick for the hands and a round object or a dry disc of animal dung for the head. One of the boys enters the robe, raising the puppet with his hands. Then they parade it through the village streets between the afternoon and evening prayers.

On the night of Sham El-Nessim, Sunday, firewood is gathered at crossroads and in front of houses. It is lit, and children and young men jump over it, chanting: “Oh, winter fleas, go to my aunt Makia!” or “Oh, fleas of our neighborhood, go to our neighbor Fatima!”

On Sham El-Nessim day, the celebration begins before sunrise. The men go at dawn to bathe in the river. The women sprinkle water inside and in front of the house. Light snacks are prepared for picnics outside the house, the most important of which are: colored boiled eggs, salted mullet and sardines, lettuce, green onions, and

malana (a type of leafy green).

Leisure time consisted of going to the fields, or along the canal banks, or riding in sailboats. There was fun, games, and communal meals. Then we would return with flowers, roses, and fragrant plants.

The train station was called a park. Green grass, flowers, roses, and trees. The railway line was surrounded by fences on both sides to protect people and animals from accidents. Every station had a large tank to supply the locomotive with water, as all trains were steam-powered.

The gates at level crossings closed before the train passed. Bells and flashing lights would start working and wouldn’t stop until the train had passed. We never heard of a single accident due to negligence or disregard for human life. All train accidents were due to individual error, such as boarding, alighting, or walking under the moving train.

The train carriages were impeccably clean. All the windows were made of glass and shutters, and the fans worked. First and second class were magnificent, with leather lounges and cushions, ceiling fans, and artistic paintings on the walls.

In our town, there was a cotton merchant who was accustomed to dealing with a foreign merchant. The merchant would buy cotton from the farmers and supply it to the merchant at the market price. The sale was conducted verbally, without paperwork or government bureaucracy. “By phone, what’s the market price, sir?” the merchant would ask. “So much,” the merchant would reply. “Okay, how many quintals have I collected?” The merchant would answer by phone, “and I bought it.”

One day, after the merchant had sold his cotton crop to the merchant over the phone, cotton prices on the market skyrocketed. The merchant became very frightened and worried that the merchant would go back on his word when he learned of the new market price, he picked up the phone and asked the merchant:

“My friend, cotton prices have skyrocketed, and I bought it from you at a low price. What do you intend to do?”
The merchant replied, “Don’t worry, sir, I gave you my word.”

No signatures, no paperwork, no recording of the call, no witnesses. But the merchant preferred to lose nearly five thousand pounds in price difference—a considerable fortune at the time—rather than break his word and lose his self-respect. I remembered this story while watching

the “Ten Hour” program on Dream TV, presented by the insightful journalist Mona El-Shazly.

The episode’s topic was the scams perpetrated by lawyers and bailiffs who seize vacant apartments whose owners are abroad. These individuals forge property sales contracts for the apartments.

Then they sell these apartments to others. Since the owner is nowhere to be found, they file lawsuits and obtain court orders granting them possession of the apartment or villa. The affected party must resort to the courts. It takes four or five years of litigation. It takes another four or five years just to recover your stolen property, if you can even find a way to do so.

This is how the Egyptians who carried out the 1919 and 1952 revolutions were. And this is our situation today. We are drowning in a swamp of corruption and crime. We swallow bitter pills, drink humiliation and disgrace, and our debts pile up while we cannot produce our own food. Yet we neither revolt nor even get angry. We rejoice like children over winning a football match here or there. Therefore, we have only ourselves to blame. There is no power nor strength except with God, the Most High, the Almighty.

3

The old taxi carrying my family was approaching Fakous, a city on the eastern edge of the Nile Delta, as the first light of dawn broke. I was wide awake while my younger brother and sister slept soundly. Field rats and small wild animals crossed the road ahead of the car as it made its way into the city.

The first thing that caught my attention as we reached the outskirts of the city was the sheer number of lampposts and the cotton bollworms that fluttered around them in the morning mist and fog. It was the summer of 1947. I hadn't yet started school as a regular student.

My father had rented an old house with a small garden containing two date palms whose dates were only good for drying, a large male mulberry tree, and a water pump. We had a young maid from our village named Rawih. She lived with us on a monthly salary of 50 piasters, which her father received. We also had a small puppy, which my mother got rid of and gave to the neighbors when she discovered it had gotten into the chicken coop and devoured a hen its own size.

My mother used to take coins with holes in the middle—millimes and piastres—and tie them together in a string for me to play with. I didn't

understand their value or meaning until one day I discovered that each coin had a magical power. You could turn it into a chocolate bar, use it to ride a swing, or buy a piece of gum. That's when these coins transformed from mere physical objects into something with a deeper meaning.

A group of chimpanzees were trained to use coins. They were fed into a vending machine that resembled a Coca-Cola machine. Then, they were trained to use the coins by inserting them into slots and pressing buttons to get the food.

Afterward, each chimpanzee was given an equal number of coins, and their behavior was observed. What happened? The stronger chimpanzees began forcibly taking the coins from the weaker ones. And the weaker chimpanzees began stealing coins from each other.

When I turned six, the school year was almost halfway through. Instead of waiting until the next year, my father asked the headmaster to accept me as a regular student, and he agreed. Government regulations were flexible and compassionate at that time.

The school was one of the compulsory schools established by Ali Pasha Mubarak, the Minister of Education during the reigns of Khedive Ismail and Khedive Tawfik. It taught the fundamentals of Arabic

and arithmetic. After completing this stage, students would go on to primary school for four years, followed by secondary school for five years. There were also rural schools, similar to primary schools, but without English.

My father left me with the headmaster and hurried away. I found myself in the classroom, surrounded by unfamiliar students. I felt intensely frightened and terribly alone. Then the teacher entered, holding a thin cane. He sat down after writing several words on the blackboard with chalk.

He asked the students, starting with the first grade, to stand and read what he had written. The students stood and read like devils, and my turn slowly approached. I was terrified, not understanding anything the teacher had written. I had never before had the honor of knowing these words or any others.

A neighbor child who knew me noticed my miserable predicament. He tried to help me with some advice. He whispered to me, "Hide under the bed until it's your turn." This advice was like a lifeline thrown to a drowning man.

But the plan didn't work, and things didn't go as planned. No sooner had I hidden under the desk than the other students shouted at the top of their lungs, "Sir, there's someone hiding under the desk!"

Of course, the result was a severe beating from the teacher, who used a stick, insults, and other forms of abuse, not to mention the public shaming and humiliation in front of all the students, regardless of their status.

The next day, my father was present, along with the headmaster and the teacher. When everyone understood exactly what had happened, the headmaster placed me in another class. The class was divided lengthwise into two sections: two rows for beginners and two rows for advanced students. The students in the first two rows were known as "the dull" and the students in the other two rows were known as "the bright ones".

Because of my young age, I was placed in the front row in the dull section. Thanks to the teacher's attention, following my father's recommendation, I quickly progressed in reading and memorization. That's why I became the "Alpha" student. When my grandfather came to visit and asked me about the school, I proudly replied, "I'm the Alpha of the dull section, Grandfather!" Little did I know it was an insult, not a compliment

.The school was located in a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city called "Inqiza." I don't know the origin of this name. I learned later, though I never verified it, that it meant "troublemakers." This neighborhood had a glorious history of resisting the

French campaign, and the word might even have French roots.

The school consisted of a large courtyard with four classrooms on the right and three on the left. In the center were the headmaster's office and a large room for the teachers. The classrooms were built of mud bricks, and the floors were dirt. So, God forbid, there were a lot of fleas.

There were drinking taps that poured into a rectangular basin, and an open latrine. I used to see bright red urine flowing in the lower urinal because most of the students had bilharzia from bathing in the irrigation canals.

One day, the headmaster's son, a toddler of about one or two, sneaked into a classroom during recess to play. Suddenly, he came running out, screaming at the top of his lungs. His older brother ran to him to find out what was wrong. He found his tender body covered in hungry fleas. He quickly took him to the water basin, undressed the child, placed him under the tap, and turned the water on full blast. The child screamed at the top of his lungs.

At midday, pots of fava beans, lentils, cheese, halva, bread, dates, and bags of salted peanuts were placed on tables in the schoolyard, and the students stood in a line to receive their free lunch. The cheese and halva were so mixed together that

they couldn't be separated. These free meals brought joy and satisfies the poor children.

My first encounter with books was with the "Weight" book used at this school. The book began with the word "Weight" written in bold across a whole page and repeated in different sizes, accompanied by a picture of a man holding a scale. Then came the words "took," "opened," "sat," "ate," "hit," "tied," and so on. The book concludes with some of Aesop's fables, the last being "The Crow, the Fox, and the Piece of Cheese".

The animal stories and illustrations in the book, though woodblock prints, offered unparalleled enjoyment. They were the reason for my lifelong love of books.

I personally witnessed a farmer suffering from cholera lying on the ground in a small hut, constantly vomiting. People were shouting at passersby to keep their distance. One of the bystanders took a long stick or palm frond and tied a piece of cloth to the end, forming a bundle containing a loaf of bread and a jug of water. He extended the stick from a distance so that the bread and water would fall near the sick man without him having to get too close.

The cholera epidemic spread, disrupting transportation. People were gripped by intense

panic. My mother kept me locked in the living room, preventing me from going out into the street.

During this epidemic, my younger sister fell ill with vomiting. She may have contracted cholera. She nearly died from dehydration, so a neighbor advised my father to give her a small dose of opium, which he had brought with him after dissolving it in a cup of tea. Given my father's state of panic, he was willing to try anything. This is how my sister recovered.

Due to the town's location on the edge of the desert, drugs like hashish and opium were widely available among the inhabitants. At that time, drug possession was considered a misdemeanor, not a felony. The police officers tasked with combating drugs would themselves sit and smoke hashish in their private gatherings.

One of these officers went to arrest hashish dealers in a commercial street known as Nazza Street. As soon as he arrested the dealer, who was from Upper Egypt, the other Upper Egyptians joined forces and attacked the officer and his accompanying police, beating them with clay pots. They inflicted severe head injuries and other injuries. They were all taken to the hospital in critical condition.

I didn't stay long at that school because my father moved to Kafr Saqr in the Sharqia Governorate. There, I enrolled in the first grade of primary school. The school was truly exemplary, completely different from the compulsory school in Fakous.

The school building was like a palace, with columns and marble staircases. The classrooms were on the second floor, with wooden doors and large windows. Each class had no more than twenty students. The school had a football field, a basketball court, bird enclosures, and flowerbeds.

The classroom walls were decorated with maps and pictures of animals. A large table in the hall displayed butterflies and stuffed birds. My classroom had a glass-doored cabinet that revealed a phonograph and records.

The art and crafts room was very large, located on the first floor, and decorated with paintings created by the students. The cafeteria was also on the first floor. From time to time, the Ministry of Education showed us entertaining and educational films. They also brought in magicians to perform their tricks, explaining them afterward.

The school was co-educational, meaning boys and girls were in each class. However, during art and crafts classes, as well as during film screenings and

magic shows, the boys and girls mixed.

Hot meals were provided. A meal consisting of rice, vegetables, meat, and fruit was served on Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. On Mondays and Thursdays, we received lighter meals such as cheese sandwiches, halva with dates, or bags of salted peanuts for dessert.

In the morning assembly, the headmaster would inspect our appearance. Hair had to be short, clothes clean, and shoes shiny. One day, the headmaster took me out of the line and gently asked me to cut my hair when I got home.

At this school, I was introduced to the school storybook. It's one of the most enjoyable books I've ever read. It was published by Dar Al-Maaref, on smooth, glossy white paper. The book begins with the story of the three goats and contains many other stories, including "Sarhan Between the Field and the House" and "Your Day Will Come," as well as other stories drawn from world, Egyptian, and Arab folklore. They were carefully selected to develop the imagination and to help nurture the first tender buds of conscience and morality at this early age.

On my way to and from school, I used to pass by two tents belonging to two Palestinian families who had fled Palestine during the 1948 war and the

beginning of the Palestinian tragedy, and had settled in this location.

One of the families had a young, sick child wearing a striped vest. After several days, I found the vest on top of the tent, but the child was gone. I later learned that he had passed away due to a lack of medicine and treatment.

A little further on, there was a rural house with a large courtyard rented by a third Palestinian family. The father was an elderly man with a white beard. The eldest son, a gentle young man named Muhammad, and the younger son, Hussein, had a slight limp.

The mother wore distinctive Palestinian clothing with a belt around her waist and would churn milk in a goatskin to make butter or spin a woolen rug. A water buffalo was tied up in the courtyard. This woman and my mother developed a close relationship that blossomed into a long-lasting friendship between our families. My father helped the eldest son find temporary work.

I experienced one painful incident at that age, but thankfully, it didn't leave any lasting negative impact, and I thank God for that. One of the little devils tempted me to help him steal a box of paints from a classmate's drawer. I watched him steal during recess. Then we went to hide the stolen

items and buried them in the schoolyard, just like hardened criminals do.

Fortunately, a student witnessed us burying the stolen items. When we returned to class after recess, the victim discovered the missing paints. The witness then volunteered to tell the teacher. The result was a sound thrashing of the thieves, which made us abhor stealing for life.

I didn't stay at that great school for more than a year. After that, my father returned to Fakous for the second time. This period was full of important events that my memory is beginning to recall, and which will be the subject of the next article, God willing. Until then.

4

My father returned to work as the custodian of the Agricultural Credit Bank's grain silo in Fakous for the second time. The silo was located at the northern edge of the city, on farmland several acres in size, surrounded by barbed wire. Alongside my father, the silo was staffed by two young employees, two laborers, and two-night watchmen armed with antique British Enfield rifles.

Farmers would bring their crops—wheat, cotton, and other produce—to deposit as collateral for loans at favorable interest rates. The bank assisted with storage and marketing and served more than half of Egypt's farmers.

It was initially established by the British as the "Egyptian Agricultural Credit Bank," then its name was changed to the "Agricultural and Cooperative Credit Bank," and I believe it is now called the "Cooperative Agricultural Credit Bank."

The grain was placed in sacks and then stacked in rows, each row called a "rassa." Wheat was piled into large, high mounds for ventilation to prevent spoilage and rot; each mound was called a "heri" or "lot."

As the sun dipped towards the horizon, its purple rays tinging the wheat piles, the granary workers would seal the lower half of each pile with a rectangular wooden stamp, its smooth surface engraved with the bank's name.

One of the workers would then carry the stamp to my father's house and return with it the following morning. This was repeated daily, for fear that the stamp might fall into the hands of the night watchmen, who would then steal the wheat and re-seal the stolen piles.

The porters at the granary toiled all day, carrying heavy sacks of grain on their weak backs for meager daily wages. At lunchtime, they would find nothing but a dried onion, pickled orange peel, or turnips with dry bread. Their faces were pale and yellow. They were barefoot, their clothes torn and worn. Yet, they possessed remarkable gentleness and chivalry.

I was playing with my younger brother among the rows of sacks when we found a hole at the bottom of one. We began to rummage through the hole, pulling out the wheat. Children that age do strange and wonderful things without thinking.

Anyway, the bottom sack with the hole kept leaking wheat

and falling. I went to find a stick to widen the hole. My little brother stayed by the hole, pulling out the wheat. When I returned with the stick, I couldn't find my brother or the hole. Instead, I saw that the sacks of grain had fallen on top of him, and nothing was visible.

I kept calling for him at the top of my lungs, but there was no response. I ran as fast as I could to my father to break the terrifying news. All I heard was "Where? Where? Where?" from everyone around him. I ran, and they all followed me, to the scene of the accident.

I saw the porters carrying the heavy sacks quickly and throwing them aside as if they were sacks of sponge, not wheat. They finally reached my brother. They found him unconscious but unharmed, without a single fracture. It turned out that as the sacks fell, one had landed at an angle on top of my little brother to protect him, and the rest of the sacks had fallen on top of him. If those sacks had fallen on an elephant, they would have killed it instantly.

Had I not left the scene to search for a stick at that moment, my brother and I would have been trapped under the sacks, and no one would have been able to find us and rescue us in time. How can I explain this incident? Was it divine providence, fate, or good fortune?

One day, after I had forgotten about this incident for some time, I heard a commotion in the street early one morning. When I went out to investigate the news, I learned that the guards of the Credit Bank's warehouse had arrested a thief who had sneaked in at night to steal wheat from the warehouse.

Since I had never seen a thief in my life, the image of a thief in my mind was not much different from the thief in the movies and Anwar Wagdi's films: a sullen-faced, gloomy-looking, harsh, and cruel man, sparks flying from his eyes, wearing a striped vest, and with a deep gash on his face. Like "Antar with the Wounded Face" in the film "Yasmin," played by the great actor Riad El Kasabgy.

I ran with the street children and we went to the grain silo. We found it open and a huge crowd had come from everywhere to see the thief. When I saw the thief, I felt great disappointment and deep sadness.

I found a young, thin, kind-faced peasant. He wasn't much different from us, except he was wearing a worn blue galabeya, the clothes of peasants at that time. Blood was flowing from his mouth because the guards of the silo had beaten him with rifle butts on his chest and back. I wondered, how could the thief be thin, kind-faced, and young? Could the thief be a human being like us?

Our house consisted of three rooms, a small living room, and a small courtyard with a water tap, a sink, and a toilet. The monthly rent was three pounds. Across from us was a grocer who wore a turban, a traditional robe, and an overcoat.

Next to it was a shop rented by a young man who couldn't read and who sold ice blocks and soft drinks in the summer. During Ramadan, he would build an oven for making kunafa in front of the shop. He supported his mother, a younger sister, and a younger brother who had one eye.

Next to the ice shop was an old house, one or two steps below street level. It was inhabited by elderly, short, dark-skinned woman with curly white hair, and a son and daughter with similar features. They seemed to be of Sudanese or Nubian origin. The son owned a car painting workshop.

When he was serving in the army, he practiced weightlifting and excelled at it. Therefore, he was chosen to represent Egypt in the military weightlifting championship in Italy in 1949. I don't remember if he won a medal or not, but in any case, he celebrated the occasion.

He set up a tent in the street. Singers and dancers were brought in. The invitation was open to everyone who could attend. The band sat on a high platform, and the singers wore galabias, fezzes, and jackets. It was winter, and the air was cold.

Children sat in the front rows, their feet barely touching the ground, and only a few adults attended the party. Popular songs by Abdel Aziz Mahmoud and Karam Mahmoud, such as "My Eyes Are Twitching, My Beloved" or "On the Shore of the Sea of Love," were played over a microphone. Interspersed throughout were announcements explaining the purpose of the party and the extraordinary achievement that had been accomplished in Italy.

A boy, slightly older than us, lived in the same area but on a different street. He had a large build for his age. Everyone called him "El-Doksh." His father had suffered a mental illness that caused his death at a young age.

His mother remarried, leaving El-Doksh in the care of his poor grandmother. The grandmother lived in a small room in a courtyard, resembling a chicken coop. She supported herself and her grandson by working as a maid and relying on charity from kind people.

One day, El-Doksh saw Shaji'a Al-Sima wearing gloves. He asked his grandmother to buy him a pair. When she refused this strange request, he chased her and threw stones at her. Kind people intervened and advised her to have mercy on herself and buy him gloves. Later, I saw El-Doksh in his tattered robe, barefoot, sitting and putting on the new gloves. It was August. He was smiling at passersby and waving to them.

The street vendor, El-Doksh, formed a street football team in his neighborhood. Since I loved playing and had no other children to play with, joining El-Doksh's team was inevitable.

My mother didn't object to me playing in the street, as the streets were safe back then. There were no kidnappings, no passing cars, no drugs, no hallucinogenic pills, and so on. Only hashish and opium were available, and those were restricted to certain social classes and only used by adults. The street, with all its residents and children, was like one big family.

I'd come home from school, drop my bag and books, and run to the street to play. I wouldn't go home except for lunch or dinner and to sleep. Of course, not all street children were angels. Mischievous thoughts would creep

in and find no resistance. We were ready to do anything, just to satisfy our curiosity.

For example, we'd attack the house of Sheikh Sarhan, the old teacher who lived on our street, with firecrackers and rockets when they were available during Ramadan, then run away.

Two of us would sit with a rope stretched across the street between us, waiting for prey. When a man or young man came running past the rope, we would suddenly yank it up, causing him to lose his balance and fall to the ground. Before he could get up, we would have vanished in an instant.

We would bring an old basket, and one of us would sit inside it, then cover it with burlap or old newspapers. Another of us would stand next to the basket, asking a passerby for help carrying it. As the poor fellow bent down to lift the basket, our brother inside would jump up, shouting at the victim. Before the victim could recover from the shock, we would be at the end of the street.

We would go to the public water taps where water carriers went to fill their water skins and containers. We would dig a deep hole and cover it with straw and paper. The poor fellow would come carrying his water skin and fall in.

We didn't do this to harm people, but for the thrill. Children are full of energy and enthusiasm. So where does he release this energy if there aren't sports fields and government-run clubs available and nearby?

Play develops a child's intelligence. A mischievous child is intelligent, not the other way around. Mischief and play are what cultivate intelligence. Creating playgrounds for children in public parks, gardens, neighborhoods, villages, and hamlets is the best investment a country can make. And it doesn't cost much.

In the city of Fakous, there was a summer cinema that operated only during the summer, and another winter cinema that operated during the winter. Both were owned by one or two families. The cinema held two evening screenings a day, from 6 to 9 pm and from 9 to midnight. The screening consisted of one Egyptian film preceded by two 20-minute foreign episodes.

The cinema was small inside, seating no more than one or two hundred people at most. It consisted of a main hall, a balcony, and a terrace. The terrace, or third class, was in front of the screen. It consisted of wooden benches without backrests. If you fell asleep, you might find yourself on the floor. A ticket for the terrace cost 22

milliemes. Families would go to the balcony or the auditorium.

Once, the cinema management made a mistake and showed a foreign film. The film came on two reels. Because the projectionist didn't know English, he showed the second half of the film before the first. None of the viewers noticed except for our teacher, who told us this story.

I am a lover of cinema. I consider it the most sublime of all arts. For a simple reason: it encompasses almost all other arts. Novels, theater, photography, set design, dance, opera, music, and so on. Cinema is not merely entertainment or a place to escape our worries and troubles.

From its very beginning, cinema's aim, besides entertainment and enjoyment, was to present reality in a new light to the viewer, making it easier for them to understand and absorb.

Why is the sight of waves crashing against rocks, or a train entering a station, more appealing and enjoyable to viewers than going to the beach or the station to see the actual waves and train? The reason is the pleasure that accompanies seeing reality re-enacted from different

perspectives.

As we grew older and time passed, our view of films became more critical. I no longer watch films to enjoy them as I did in my childhood. I watch them to critique them and point out their artistic flaws.

Did the actors perform their roles faithfully? Does the lighting serve the dramatic situation? Does the script serve the plot? Does the music blend seamlessly with the film's events, or does it feel out of place and jarring?

Were the camera movements and zooms in and out effective? Does the director have a clear signature style, or is the film simply a haphazard cut-and-paste job like most of our new movies? ...etc.

But this analytical approach to watching films has robbed me of the simple joy I enjoyed as a child. I'll never forget the scene of the brave man imprisoned in the cell, the water slowly rising until it reached his head. He struggles to keep his head above water, and then the episode ends.

We have to wait until the following week to see how the brave man manages to escape this predicament. I spent the whole week discussing it with the other children who

watched the episode, exploring every possible way to survive. We couldn't come up with the right solution, as if the brave man's life were truly in danger.

When we returned the following week, we found that the thieves had suddenly remembered that the brave man had an important map, so they decided to get it and shut off the tap, cutting off the water supply. And just like that, the brave man escaped this unique predicament.

The main characters in the episodes were always: the brave man, the thieves, his sister, his brother, and his cousin. The plot wasn't important; we didn't follow the events. We followed the action and the fighting.

For us, cinema wasn't just about films; it was about reality. Anwar Wagdi, Laila Mourad, Bishara Wakim weren't just actors to us; they were members of our families, like uncles, aunts, grandpa, and grandma. I remember going behind the cinema building one day to look and see the actors performing, and I was surprised to find no one there.

For the poor at that time, cinema was their only source of pleasure, alongside the pleasure of having children for adults, as our great teacher Youssef Idris says in his story "The Cheapest Nights." Cinema is another world of magic,

beauty, and imagination for a child.

Old movies, black and white movies, including the movies of Anwar Wagdi, Mohamed Fawzi, Farid al-Atrash, Abdel Aziz Mahmoud, Youssef Wahbi, Hussein Sedky...etc., used to entertain, teach and capture all of the child's attention.

These films enriched a child's life, nurturing their imagination and intelligence, acknowledging their psychological struggles and repressed emotions, and suggesting solutions. Simultaneously, they connected with different facets of their personality, fostering self-confidence and optimism for the future.

Children can learn much from classic films about inner human problems and their appropriate solutions. They are among the most accessible ways to communicate with the uneducated, carrying an important message to both the conscious and subconscious mind. They speak to the budding ego within our children and help them grow.

They also alleviate subconscious pressures, addressing issues like narcissism, the Oedipus complex, and sibling rivalry. They illuminate the realities of life, including good and evil, life and death, reinforcing the sayings "crime doesn't pay" and "good always triumphs over evil."

Children don't understand the explanations for the events, phenomena, and emotions they experience. They don't understand that people cry because they are sad, but simply because they cry. Nor do they understand that their destruction of things stems from anger. He responds to an inner drive because he doesn't understand.

Speaking to a child's mind isn't about explaining reasons and motivations, but rather about using the images and characters in a film. These are more capable of directly addressing the subconscious.

Young children don't think logically and reason-wise the way we adults do. That comes later, gradually, as they grow older. A child might be delighted when we tell them they've surpassed adults or even their parents in a particular area. But this feeling can also create anxiety in the child, as they feel their protection and security through their parents are threatened.

However, they enjoy the hero's ability to overcome horrors and difficulties and triumph over villains without their sense of security and care being compromised. Furthermore, the events of the film might suggest to them that intellect and resourcefulness, not just brute force, are sufficient to overcome life's challenges.

We've forgotten the magic of simple films that convey great human values directly to the hearts of our children and our illiterate populations, without intermediaries, so that these values become an integral part of their lives and future.

5

The city of Fakous, where we lived, is located on the eastern edge of the Nile Delta. It is about 30 kilometers from Zagazig, the capital of the Sharqia Governorate. Most of its inhabitants are merchants and expatriate workers. It has a primary and secondary school that accommodates a large number of boys. There is another school for girls nearby.

The city's streets and the roads leading to it are all unpaved dirt roads. The municipality sweeps and sprays them twice a day, in the morning and afternoon, using spray trucks. The sweepers wear galabiyas and carry baskets and brooms. Each broom is a long wooden handle ending in a date palm spathe.

A spathe is the cluster of many branches that bear dates on a palm tree. Imru' al-Qais wrote in his poetry, describing his beloved's thick, jet-black hair:

"And a branch covering the back,
jet-black and thick,

like a cluster of dates on a palm tree."

Spraying the streets and roads prevents dust from becoming airborne and entering homes and shops. The spray truck is a large tank mounted on two wheels, similar to those of a horse-drawn cart, and pulled by a mule. It has a top opening for filling with water and two horizontally positioned rear pipes, perforated for spraying.

The driver sits atop the tank and controls the flow of spray water. In the summer, children run after the spray trucks to cool off in the refreshing water. Throughout the city, there are large water taps with long hoses to supply the trucks with water.

On my way to school early in the morning, I would see the owners of shops and local cafes, after sweeping and mopping their premises, also spraying water in front of their shops. The streets were clean, and so were hearts and consciences.

To my right, I would pass Al-Waziri's hardware store. His younger brother, Saeed, was in my school and was martyred in the 1967 war. In front of it was Al-Basha's shop, which sold and pressed fezzes.

The fez-making industry was thriving at that time, but it declined after the revolution of 52. One of Al-Basha's sons was my classmate; he later became a pharmacist. Had it

not been for free university education during Gamal Abdel Nasser's era, neither I nor anyone like me would have had any hope of entering university.

The word "tarboosh" is Persian, composed of two parts, and means head covering. The English name "Fez" refers to the city of Fez in Morocco, as tarbooshes were initially manufactured there. Army officers during Muhammad Ali's reign wore tarbooshes. The first tarboosh made in Egypt was in 1825.

For Egyptians, the red tarboosh was a national symbol, much like the green flag with its crescent and three stars. However, in Turkey, Kemal Atatürk abolished both the tarbooshes and the hijabs in a single day, deeming them symbols of backwardness.

In 1952, with the revolution, the tarboosh and the titles "Effendi," "Bey," and "Pasha" were also abolished. Currently in Egypt, tarbooshes are only sold in tourist areas and Khan El-Khalili. Titles have returned, but unofficially.

I continue walking to school and, after a while, I find Khawaja Karkour Nishan's shoe shop, followed by Al-Sabbagh's haberdashery shop. Then a large Greek grocery store. Next, a spacious square, then the railway.

Following that, a bridge over a small canal, and a large wooden billboard advertising the film showing this week.

Across from the billboard, an old, dark-skinned man from Upper Egypt, with a large white mustache, wearing a fez and a traditional robe, sits in the street. In front of him is a basket containing three stale cucumbers, a bruised eggplant, and one or two moldy oranges. He has an old sock with him, which he moistens to polish his wares, hoping to attract customers.

I continue walking through the crowded streets. Many shops—grocery stores, hardware stores, pharmacies, fruit vendors, and so on—line both on the right and the left, until I reach the school.

When it rains, the streets turn into puddles and swamps. The muddy ground doesn't absorb water easily. I walk carefully and slowly, carrying my schoolbag, like someone walking a tightrope to maintain my balance. Every now and then, I find bricks laid out for pedestrians. Kind people have placed them in the muddy areas or where water collects heavily.

On my way home from school, I take a different route, avoiding the crowds in the town center. I walk alongside a small canal on the left. To the right, I found villas lined up

along the canal. I only saw one of them occupied.

In one of them, I saw a young woman of exceptional beauty and charm. She was standing on a balcony, talking to a man in the garden. It seemed these villas belonged to people who lived in Cairo and came to them for rest and relaxation during their free time and in the summer.

At the end of these villas, just before reaching the large canal opposite, stood a large house belonging to a wealthy man. He had grown children and much land. The man was ill and lived alone in this house. His children brought him a middle-aged widow to serve him and attend to his needs, such as cooking, washing clothes, and cleaning.

The woman lived in an old house opposite ours in the city center. The locals called her "Kashkaya," after the dish kishk, made from white flour and milk. Perhaps it was because of her fair complexion, rosy cheeks, and elegant figure. She seemed to be of Turkish origin, or perhaps from the Mamluk dynasty that once ruled Egypt.

She had grown children. One of them worked in Cairo, another was married, a third was a young man, and the fourth was a small child living with his older brother. Her young son, when he came to visit his mother, used to play

with us in the street.

One day, he took me into the wealthy man's house while he was looking for his mother. The house consisted of a large hall with several rooms branching off, ending at the back with a small, neglected garden.

One day, this woman went to check on her young son and couldn't find him. As the sun began to set, the woman went into a frenzy, running around asking everywhere until she found him bathing in the large canal called "Al-Mashrou'."

She searched for his clothes and found them on the bank. To teach him an unforgettable lesson, she took his clothes back to her house and left him naked on the bank. The boy, in his miserable state, had nowhere to go except a prayer room nearby.

An elderly sheikh came to pray and found the boy naked in the prayer room. Before he could ask what had happened, suspicions began to plague his mind. He shouted at the boy and chased after him, throwing stones at him. The boy ran naked, the old man chasing after him, and the people laughed hysterically until the boy returned home.

Several months after this incident, one summer morning, I heard a commotion in the street. I went out to investigate and found people running towards the large canal. What had happened? I heard people shouting, "Somebody's drowning! Somebody's drowning!"

Since I had never seen a drowning person before, I went to see one. When I reached the canal near the grain silo of the Credit Bank where my father worked, I found people crowding both banks. It was late afternoon, the sun beginning to set, and the river was overflowing. A breeze caressed its shimmering surface, creating fine, velvety waves.

As I approached, I was horrified by what I saw. I found the mother of the child I was playing with, lying lifeless on the bank after being pulled from the river. She was naked, bloated, pinkish in color, and her limbs were decaying. The stench of death filled the air. People were searching for something, like newspapers, to throw on top of her. One of her sons was throwing dirt on his head and slapping his face as if he were responsible for what had happened to his mother. People were embracing him and trying to stop him.

I was deeply shocked by this gruesome sight. I had a lump in my throat and lost my appetite for several days. I

couldn't sleep for several nights on end. I had never before seen, smelled, or known a dead body in such a state.

Death had previously been just a cinematic event for me, happening like any other in a film. But this time, I saw it as a real event right before my eyes. Oh, the majesty and awe of death!

Rumors said the woman had made a mistake, the biggest mistake of her life, when she agreed to marry the ailing rich man. The rich man's sons, of course, wouldn't accept anyone sharing their inheritance, dividing up their lands, mango orchards, and hundreds of acres. Besides, she was a commoner, and the two races shouldn't mix.

Naturally, the incident was recorded as a crime committed by an unknown perpetrator. The advice quickly reached her sons to keep quiet. Laws are like spiderwebs, torn apart by the strong and faltering in the face of the weak.

After the rich man's house, on my way home from school, I crossed a small bridge, then a larger one in front of the summer cinema. Next came a railway crossing, then a third bridge. The city had no fewer than seven river bridges.

On the banks of the canals, the Poinciana trees stood with

their red blossoms, burning brightly in the sun throughout the summer. The sky was a clear blue, dotted with a few bright white clouds. Breathtaking views that captivated the heart. You wouldn't find such beauty in Switzerland, or even in the most beautiful countries of Europe or America. What has happened to us? Who is responsible for the disappearance of beauty from our lives?

I was passing by the fire brigade. I saw them washing their hoses and drying them in the sun. Then they polished their brass instruments and hung them on the wall. In those good old days, fire brigades were professional musicians in addition to their official duties of extinguishing fires.

This made sense, since fires didn't happen every day. The fire brigade was hired for a small fee to perform at weddings and other celebrations. They would play music in kiosks in public parks and march in festivals during holidays and national events in their official uniforms.

I passed a thin old man wearing a galabeya and a fez, sitting on the sidewalk in front of a shop. He was turning pieces of wood, transforming them into exquisitely beautiful and delicate works of art. He made chair legs, hookah necks, or parts of arabesque windows.

All his tools were a bow, string, and chisel. He places the

chisel between his toes and ties the string around the piece of wood. He moves the bow back and forth, causing the piece of wood to rotate with the movement of the string. With his other hand, he controls the angle at which the chisel meets the rotating piece of wood.

Skill and extraordinary creativity. We lost them when we became detached from the work we do. Work has become a means of survival and cunning. The goal is to exert minimal effort and earn the highest wage. Work is no longer a means of self-realization and personal growth as it once was.

The body perishes, but our deeds endure. If you plant a tree, it grows and bears' fruit. People, birds, and all other creatures eat its fruit. Its flowers spread fragrance, and its leaves provide oxygen to fill our lungs with life. From its seeds, trees upon trees grow. An act like planting a tree may seem simple, but it is, in reality, an eternal and unending endeavor.

For the ancient Egyptians, work was a spiritual state of devotion, mysticism, and monasticism. Only the artist and those who love and dedicate themselves to their work truly understand it. This is why the pyramids, temples, and magnificent statues were built.

Today, work is merely a job from one hour to another. There is no time for reflection or innovation. Our souls and minds are disconnected from the work we do. We have become mere spectators, watching our bodies work, but our souls and minds remain distant. Thus, we find that the product, too, has become a body without a soul.

The walls of some buildings along my route were covered with slogans in red and blue in support of Palestine. They praised the Egyptian heroes who volunteered to fight alongside the Palestinian people, such as the hero Ahmed Abdel Aziz and the "Black Hyena," Major General Sayed Taha.

The hero Ahmed Abdel Aziz was a high-ranking officer in the Egyptian army. When he saw the Arab rulers' reluctance to support their Palestinian brothers in 1948, he and a group of his men resigned from the Egyptian army and went to resist the Zionist forces. He was martyred on Palestinian soil in a reckless operation.

After Ahmed Abdel Aziz's martyrdom, the village of Iraq al-Manshiya was engaged in battles against Zionist gangs, battles that expanded to al-Faluja. Following these battles, legendary auras were woven around Egyptian fighters like Major General Sayed Taha, an Upper Egyptian from Aswan. He was known for his resilience and fervent Arab

nationalist sentiments.

He was nicknamed the "Hyena of al-Faluja" or the "Black Hyena" because of his copper-brown complexion. It was Yitzhak Rabin who bestowed the nickname "Black Hyena" upon Sayed Taha. Because Taha had caused the deaths of many Zionist gangs and had preserved his forces during the long siege of Faluja.

I continued walking towards my home when I passed an elderly man with poor eyesight, feeling his way with difficulty using a cane. He had a young son, a man of great gentleness and good character. After graduating from university, the son went to complete his military service.

On his way back to visit his father, the old man, some friends tempted him to ride on top of the train. The overpasses under which the train passes are unpredictable and come without warning. Fate would have it that this poor old man would be mercilessly cruel. He was devastated by the loss of his son, his only support, and the son died this horrific death. And so life goes on, with its joys and sorrows.

6

There were three of us children, between ten and eleven years old. There were me and a second child, Rifaat, who later became a lawyer, then a member of the Shura Council, and then the People's Assembly for several consecutive terms. The third child was named Hussein; I haven't heard anything about him since childhood.

On our way to school, we decided to run away to the fields, under the pretext of studying outdoors. The school year was nearing its end, and the school was no longer strictly recording absences; the teachers were only reviewing material.

Although we didn't actually study a single word during this adventure, I don't regret this reckless act. It left me with the most beautiful memories a person could have.

We started on the agricultural road at the edge of the village. The railway was on the left, and the green fields stretched as far as the eye could see on the right. We talked about anything but school subjects. The sun was beginning to rise and recede from the horizon. The air was warm and fragrant. The scent of the countryside filled the

air. There was a calm and quiet atmosphere, amplified only by the buzz of a fly here or the call of a bird there.

The road was a dirt track, winding between the fields. Not many vehicles passed by at that time. Trees lined both sides of the road. In the distance, you could see cattle egrets with their bright white plumage, long orange beaks and legs. They raised and lowered their heads, busy eating their morning meal.

The sun sent forth its bright rays. A gentle breeze soothed us. Innocent talk and laughter occupied our thoughts. I see now the beauty of these white birds amidst the green fields through the lens of memory, mingled with the experiences of years past. But children, at such a young age, are not yet captivated by the beauty, charm, tranquility, and purity of the countryside. That comes later, gradually.

We found two laborers on the road, paving and watering it. They sat down to rest on two flat stones. One of them initiated a conversation, asking why we were there at this particular time. The conversation then turned to school lessons and arithmetic. One of them challenged us with a long division problem, followed by a riddle:
"What thing grows bigger the more you take from it?"

I answered immediately: "A hole." A look of admiration and surprise spread across the man's face, remaining with him until we left. I don't know how the answer came to me so quickly. God has blessed me with an analytical mind, and I don't know if this is a blessing or a curse, because it has caused me a great deal of trouble later on, which I will discuss later.

I don't accept anything or any information unless it is well-balanced and reasonable. I am amazed by those who can believe anything so easily and readily, without making any effort to examine it logically. I don't understand belief based on wishful thinking, or the desire for some benefit, or to escape pain.

When you walk through fields, you become part of nature. But when you look out of a train or car window, or watch a movie, television, or computer screen, you are one thing, and what you see is another. You are still, and the scenes pass before you like successive paintings in rectangular frames.

But when you are in the embrace of nature, you are part of it, like its earth, its fields, its trees, its birds, its water, and its sky. You are no longer an observer or a spectator from the outside; you are within the scene itself.

Your footsteps on the earth are real. Placing your hand on a tree trunk, grasping a piece of wood, or a pebble lying on the ground is real. It is a spiritual experience that is not easily or quickly erased from our conscious minds.

We see the countryside time and time again. But each time, indeed every moment, we see it as uniquely different from the moment before or the moment after. It's all according to the angle of the sun on the horizon, the density of the clouds, the seasons, the age and type of vegetation, the strength of the wind or the rainfall, your location, direction, height, age, condition, mood, culture, and mental capacity.

The beautiful silvery green of bean or cabbage fields differs from the vibrant green of clover fields. Green wheat stalks slowly transform into golden ears that gleam and shine under the bright midday sun. They turn purple at dusk, then gray at sunset.

Leaves arrange themselves, flatten, and lie close together to face the sun, embracing its golden rays. The light reflects off the irrigation canals at midday, shining like diamonds and silver on the surface of the flowing water.

Wildflowers and cattails line the irrigation ditches, resembling the frames of exquisitely beautiful paintings.

The breezes, fragrant with orange blossoms, at the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, possess an unparalleled sweetness and aroma.

Flocks of cattle egrets, with their long, reddish-orange legs and pristine white plumage, along with egrets and hoopoes, can be seen here and there, perched on the ground or soaring in the sky. The countryside is a living entity, constantly changing like the river. Amr ibn al-Aas described Egypt:
"A white pearl, then a black amber, then a green emerald. Exalted is God, the Doer of what He wills."

As we grow older, we are in a hurry. No time for observation, reflection, or conversation. Time passes quickly, and we wonder where our lives have gone, slipping away.

We would occasionally leave the road to walk along the railway tracks between the rails. Then we would race along the tracks themselves, trying to maintain our balance. We would see half a dead dog, struck by a train on the line. A dog lived and died a dog's death in our land. Prickly pear cacti appear on either side.

The railway tracks, despite their parallel course, appear to draw closer as they stretch, until they meet on the distant

horizon. In reality, there is no convergence or meeting. This is simply an optical illusion. Is this deception, or a distortion of reality, presenting it in a different light to help us determine distances?

Without this optical illusion, our ancestors, running naked through the forests, would never have been able to hunt their prey. Seeing distant animals as small and nearby ones as large helps us determine distances. How many truths have we obscured and altered to continue living?

We passed a small village called Al-Biroum on the right side of the road. It is the hometown of the prince of Arabic short stories, Youssef Idris (1927-1991), the great Egyptian thinker and writer. He contributed twenty short story collections, five novels, and ten plays to Arabic literature, and his works have been translated into 24 languages.

He is one of the most famous doctors who left medicine to dedicate themselves to literature, like Mustafa Mahmoud and Alaa Al-Aswany. Perhaps the common thread between medicine and literature is the desire to alleviate human suffering.

We left the village of Al-Biroum and continued for several more kilometers until we reached a village called Al-

Fadadna. The sun was high in the sky, shadows were almost gone, and the air was still and hot. But because of the long distance we had walked, we were gnawing at us with hunger and thirst. The three of us had only three fares, not enough to cover the return trip by train or bus.

We found onions growing in one of the fields. We pulled several onions out by the roots to eat. But green onions neither fill us up nor quench our thirst. So, we decided to go back. But what about our hunger and thirst? That's when our friend Rifaat suggested we beg for food.

"Are you crazy? Beg like beggars?" I asked. He replied simply, "Yes. What's it to you? I'll do the begging." After some hesitation, fearing the villagers would hand us over to the police, and driven by hunger, we agreed on the condition that our friend Rifaat would do it.

We entered the village and wandered through its alleys and past its mud-brick houses with wood roofs. We decided to choose a secluded house with no neighbors, one that appeared impoverished, reasoning that the poor are the most generous.

We found one at the edge of the village, facing the green fields. In front of it, by the door, was a mud bench covered

with mats. "Yes, that's the house!" one of us shouted. I took Hussein, and Rifaat, the one who came up with the idea, let us approach the house. We hid behind a distant wall, watching him, nearly dying of laughter at the absurdity of the idea, expecting a severe beating or a slap on the face.

Rifaat bravely knocked on the door. An old peasant woman opened it. He started talking to her, and we watched from a distance, not knowing what they were saying. Then the woman went inside, leaving our friend standing at the door. After a while of anxious waiting, our friend gestured for us to come closer. "

What happened, Rifaat?" we asked. "Sit here on the mat on the bench," he said. "The woman went inside to get us some food."

"What did you say to her?" we asked. "Simply," he replied: "I asked her if there was a grocer here where I could buy food."

"No, my son," she answered, "there aren't any food shops here."

Then she asked him, "Do you want to eat?"

"Yes, I'm hungry," he said.

"Sit here, and I'll get you something to eat," she told him. "But I have two friends with me," he said.

"Of course," she said. "Bring them with you, they're welcome," she said, and went inside.

We waited, but there was no sign of her. We mocked and ridiculed the person who came up with the idea. We said, "The lady must have gone to call her relatives to arrest us and hand us over to the police." He replied, "Wait, for God is with the patient."

Time dragged on endlessly, our eyes fixed on the door, waiting for the lady, but she didn't appear. After what seemed an eternity, the old woman returned with a large copper tray laden with various foods:

A large plate of eggs fried in ghee, boiled eggs, white peasant cheese, a plate of honey, molasses, a plate of cream and toasted peasant bread, green onions, aged cheese, and pickles. Then she brought a jug of cold water with a copper lid and left us, saying, "Enjoy your meal."

We devoured the food like madmen. We drank and ate without chewing. I have never tasted anything more delicious or flavorful than this heavenly food. This lady must be one of the angels described in the holy books. All

she had to do was give us a piece of bread and some cheese, and we would have been grateful. But for her to bring all her food to children she didn't know—I'd never heard of such a thing before.

We waited for the woman to reappear so we could thank her, but she didn't. We knocked on the door several times, but there was no answer. We left and walked back home. This is the true Egyptian woman, and this is the beautiful era we've lost; we wish it would return.

7

When I used to leave home as a young child to visit my father at his workplace in the Agricultural Credit Bank warehouse in Fakous, the distance seemed long, the houses and shops large and tall, and the people as tall as giants. Everything was enormous, even time seemed longer and slower.

I noticed this when I visited these places two years ago, driven by nostalgia. To my great surprise, I found that everything, as we say colloquially, was distorted. The streets that were once wide had become narrow. Long distances had become short. Tall buildings had become low. People had shrunk from being giants. Time, too, seemed to fly by as we grew older.

On my way to and from my father's visit, I would amuse myself by observing everything I passed. This brick, I would kick it with my foot to feel my own presence. This rough wall, I would run my finger along its surface to gauge its roughness and texture. This shop sign was written in Ruq'ah script, another in Naskh script, and a third with just some random writing in poor handwriting.

This is a sesame oil press. A man is tied as a mule to operate the millstone. In front of its door is a dark area due to the oil mixing with the street dust. The owner's son was in our school.

The owner bought a mill near our house. The mill was built on an area of at least one acre, and the purchase price was two thousand pounds at that time.

There was a fair-skinned, rosy-cheeked, overweight young man in his twenties, wearing a white, pressed galabeya. He wore gold rings on his fingers and styled his hair, applying Vaseline. I don't know this young man's connection to the mill; perhaps he was related to its owner.

One day, this young man went to the room where the milling machine was located. The milling machine ran on diesel and transmitted power via long belts to the grinding areas. Unfortunately for this young man, the hem of his galabeya got caught on one of the belts. The machine pulled him in and crushed him, while he screamed at the top of his lungs. But the machine's noise was too loud for anyone to hear him. Scenes of horror aren't limited to Hitchcock and Boris Karloff films.

One of the fabric shops was owned by a man with four daughters and one son named Rashad. The man was

obsessed with his son Rashad. If you went to buy a piece of fabric, he would immediately start talking about his young son who would succeed him in running the shop. Then he would tell you, "I changed the shop's name to Rashad, and I take him with me to meet wholesalers," and so on.

Of course, things don't always go as we wish. But they have their own laws, which don't always work in a good direction. Hegel calls them "the terror of history," where victims are bound and killed in cold blood, often as sacrifices.

On the wedding day of Rashad's sister, the shop owner's son, the tent was erected, and the band, singers, dancers, guests, the officiant, and witnesses arrived. Animals were slaughtered, and sherbet was served. Gunshots began to be heard from time to time.

In this joyous atmosphere, a clumsy man who had never used a gun before insisted on being friendly. Of course, one has to be friendly in circumstances like these. He pointed the rifle upwards, unaware that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The fool pulled the trigger, and the rifle spun in his hand, striking Rashad in the chest, right in the heart. The rest, of course, needs no further description.

I passed by the shop immediately after this tragic incident, and it was closed. It remained closed for a long time. When the shop reopened, things were never the same again.

Joy and smiles had vanished from the entire street. One of the workers was running the shop in the father's absence. When the grieving father appeared, he was utterly dejected and hopeless. He was eager to leave to join his son, his only love.

Next to the fabricator's shop, one passed a tailor's shop. It was owned by Osta Abdel Fattah. Osta Abdel Fattah was a tailor like no other. His hands were as delicate as silk, as the saying goes. But he had one flaw: his punctuality. He'd give you an appointment a week later. You'd go to pick up the clothes on time, and he'd swear by divorce that they were ready, just needing the buttons on. In reality, he hadn't even touched the fabric.

This Abdel Fattah went with his farmer brother and a third friend to the fields at night to smoke hashish. Of course, the fields and boats were the best places to smoke hashish because they were far from the eyes of the police. They sat in a hut in the field and lit coals in the clay stove, or "chalet," as we call it in Sharqia. They took turns

inhaling the smoke from the walnut wood, exhaling it through their nostrils after placing a piece of hashish (the "ta'mira") on top of the charcoal.

The silence was broken only by the croaking of frogs and the chirping of insects. The air was mild, and the scent of orange blossoms drifted in on the breeze from time to time. Abdel Fattah and his companions were hidden in the hut, out of sight and shrouded in darkness. The sky glittered with stars in the absence of the moon. Only faint lights appeared on the distant horizon.

Suddenly, they heard a deafening scream that shattered the stillness of the night. "I'm at your mercy, Uncle Al-Jolshani!" Then there was a silence as profound as the grave. Of course, our three friends were paralyzed with fear and terror. They extinguished the coals and froze in place until morning.

Three days later, the villagers found the body of a drowned man in the canal, which had been blocked by the river gate. As a child, I went with hundreds of other children to see the body. Men with long sticks were trying to push the body aside so it could be pulled out of the water. The stench of decay and drowning filled the air.

Al-Jolshani was a married man whose wife owned

farmland. He had a son who worked with my father as an assistant in the grain silo. One night, Al-Jolshani was at home with his friends, smoking hashish. A group of children were playing, as usual, under a lamppost near Al-Jolshani's house.

Al-Jolshani went out angrily to chase the children away, cursing them and telling them to play somewhere else, as he didn't want anything to spoil his mood at that moment. But children are children. After a while, they returned to play under the same lamppost, ignoring Al-Jolshani's insults.

"Go away, you sons of bitches! I swear I'll kill you all!" One of the children retorted, "You're the son of a bitch!" Al-Jolshani chased after the child, caught him, and beat him. Then he swore by divorce that he would kill him with a knife.

Of course, the hashish played a significant role in what happened. The man wasn't in his right mind. But there was a problem. He had sworn by divorce, so how could he fulfill that oath without harming the child?

Some kind people intervened to find a solution to this difficult situation. A suggestion was made: "Let's bring the child, and let the man hold the knife upside down. Then

he'll run the knife across the child's neck. In this case, he'll have fulfilled his oath and not harmed the child. All will be well and good. Everyone will be friends again."

Who could refuse such a reasonable suggestion? It was immediately agreed. A reconciliation council was formed, comprised of the child's father's friends and the man's friends. The child and the knife were brought in. Then, as a customary greeting for such occasions, a hookah was passed around. A second, a third, and a fourth act. Now it was time to perform the charade so that the man could fulfill his oath.

They brought the child before Al-Jolshani. They explained to the child that this was just a performance and nothing to be afraid of. The child knelt down, lowered his head, and craned his neck forward. Al-Jolshani took the knife. Quickly, to the astonishment of those present, he turned the knife over and, with its sharp blade, slaughtered the child in front of his father and everyone else.

Al-Jolshani was arrested. He sold all his possessions and all his wife's belongings to pay for the case. The court eventually sentenced him to seven years of hard labor. The reason for this lenient sentence was that he was under the influence of drugs when he committed this heinous act.

Al-Jolshani left prison penniless. He found no other way to make a living than dealing in opium and hashish. He dealt with dealers outside the city who would visit him from time to time to deliver the goods and collect payment.

A young man, seemingly new to the trade, came to deal with Al-Jolshani. After he delivered the goods, Al-Jolshani told him that the money would be ready the following week. When the young man returned, and after Al-Jolshani confirmed that he was working alone and had no one to back him up, he told him the money was buried underground in the field, for fear of police raids.

Al-Jolshani took the young man to the field. Suddenly, he slaughtered him and threw his body into the canal. This is the same young man who used to cry out, "I'm at your mercy, Uncle Al-Jolshani!"

I saw Al-Jolshani many times. He lived on a street that crossed ours, a few hundred meters away. Once, he came to complain to my father about his son, who my father was his boss. The man was thin and short. He wore a traditional robe, overcoat, and skullcap. He was in his fifties. His face never showed a smile or any kind of emotion. His son said he was an ideal father and an ideal husband. Is that even possible?

After the young man's murder in the field, nothing was proven against Al-Jolshani. But the whole town knew about the story. His prestige increased, and everyone feared him. The powerful land own families began using him for matters of blood feuds, elections, and dirty work.

In the 1940s, Fakous was home to incredibly wealthy and influential families. They vied for the position of mayor and seats in parliament. One of the children from these families, a boy named Alaa, was in my class.

On his mother's wedding day, the grandfather's gift to his father was 200 acres of land and a car with gold keys. This gives us an idea of how wealthy these people were.

His mother would go for a walk at dusk in her jewel-encrusted white dress, escorted by two guards in front of her and two more behind her carrying rifles. I saw this myself. The newly married lived in a magnificent palace surrounded by ornamental trees adorned with lights that illuminated the night. The palace was enclosed with large mango and orange orchards enclosed by high walls.

Their young son was escorted to school by a guard and a personal servant carrying his leather satchel. On his first day of school, one of the teachers entered the classroom

calling his name. When he found him sitting in the second row like the rest of the students, the teacher glanced askance at one of the students setting in front row and shouted at him, "Get up, you son of a dog, and sit in the back. Come here, Alaa, and sit here." Then he looked at the child sitting next to him and scrutinized him closely. When he found that he didn't like the child's appearance, he told him to find a place in the back as well. He chose the cleanest and most stylish child to sit next to Alaa, the son of the elite.

I never felt in my life that people were stratified except that day. The rest of the students were all wearing the same clothes: identical trousers and shoes with holes in them or sandals with holes and no buckles. They had never seen a warnish in their lives.

Some trousers have built-in suspenders, made of the same fabric as the trousers. Others have no suspenders or belts. Shirts never been ironed, and sweaters, if there are any, are poorly made by hand. Hair is cut short, and some of us leave a square in the middle of our heads for decoration.

Not to mention the rheum in our eyes, cuts and scrapes on our skin and legs from playing football in the street. But Alaa is different.

He looks like King Farouk when he was young. He wears a perfectly pressed suit, shiny shoes, and a pristine white shirt with a tie. His hair is straight like a foreigner's, long, combed, parted on the side, and smeared with Vaseline. His bag is made of fine leather, and his pen is a Parker 51 or something similar. These kids are a sight to behold, and they command respect.

The teacher enters the first class saying, "Where's Alaa? How are you, Alaa? What's up, Alaa?" As for the rest, it's, "Sit down, you son of a dog. Shut up, you son of a dog." When the teacher explains something, he explains it only to Alaa. And when he asks a question, he asks it only to Alaa. It was as if the class consisted only of Alaa.

Of course, this didn't cause us any psychological problems when we were young, because we felt that these people didn't belong to the Egyptian race. Firstly, their numbers were very small, and they lived far away from us. Therefore, there was no social pressure.

As for the rest of the population, they lived in similar houses, furnished with the same furniture. We wore the same clothes, ate the same food, and received the same allowance—a piaster a day, or nothing at all. When I went to study with another child, his house and its furnishings

were no different from ours. They didn't own a car, and neither did we. They had an old Philips radio, and so did we. Their bed was made of brass with a mosquito net, and so were ours.

Therefore, there was no class hatred within the same street or even the same family, unlike what exists now. Because of the disparity in income and the oil money, you find this class hatred within the same family. One person lives like a king, while his brother is dying of hunger or barely able to find enough to eat.

One of these prominent figures was the mayor of a large district in the city. He had become involved in politics. His magnificent palace was a hive of activity, bustling with activity. It was election time, and he ran for parliament every term.

It was common practice for such candidates to plant spies and informants among their opponents to learn their rivals' and enemies' plans. Every means, legal and illegal, was employed to win the elections. Murder and kidnapping were the easiest. The conflict here was a struggle for power and authority after wealth had been secured. And when wealth was combined with power, the consequences were unimaginable.

News arrived that one of the guards had been sneaking into the rivals' camp from time to time. After monitoring him and confirming the information, he was interrogated. He initially denied it. But under the pressure of the interrogation, the questions, and the witnesses, he was forced to confess. He explained that something was being plotted in secret.

The rival family intended to contest the elections and win at any cost. They decided to eliminate their powerful and fierce rival, the hero of our story. The plan was for Al-Jolshani and the guard to assassinate the wealthy man by taking him by surprise in exchange for a large sum of money. The agreement was made, and Al-Jolshani received the down payment and placed it in his inside coat pocket.

The wealthy man, the protagonist of our story, had many enemies. If the plan succeeded, his blood could have been spilled among the tribes without anyone knowing the killer. Of course, no one would suspect the guard or Al-Jolshani, as they were among his most loyal men.

The guard was bound hand and foot and thrown into a granary until his case could be investigated. Afterwards, Al-Jolshani was hastily summoned under the pretext of carrying out a dirty task for the wealthy man.

Al-Jolshani arrived quickly and found himself in a gathering of men resembling a jury, with the wealthy man sitting in the center. Anger was evident on his face, sparks flying from his eyes. Al-Jolshani was taken aback and felt apprehensive, but he remained composed, showing no signs of fear or anxiety.

The wealthy man completely ignored Al-Jolshani and addressed his men and the jury, saying, "What do you think, men, of someone who betrays a bond of trust? What does he deserve?" They all answered in unison, "Death, of course." Al-Jolshani's face paled, and a lump formed in his throat, making it difficult to swallow.

Then the wealthy man turned to Al-Jolshani and asked him the same question: "What do you think, Al-Jolshani, of someone who betrays a bond of trust?" Al-Jolshani answered hesitantly and in a low voice, swallowing hard, "Yes, exactly." The wealthy man immediately asked, "What's the truth? I want to hear it from you." Al-Jolshani replied, "A traitor deserves to be killed."

The wealthy man spat in Al-Jolshani's face and called him a traitor. Then he harshly reprimanded him for participating in a plot to kill him for money. Al-Jolshani vehemently denied it and swore by divorce that he was innocent of the

accusation. He claimed it was a plot by his enemies because of his loyalty and devotion to the wealthy man.

At that point, one of the wealthy man's men searched Al-Jolshani, and, to his misfortune, they found the advance payment still in the inside pocket of his coat.

When Al-Jolshani couldn't explain the presence of the money in his pocket, he collapsed to his knees and bowed to kiss the wealthy man's feet, begging for forgiveness. But the wealthy man showed him no mercy and ordered his men to finish him off. Al-Jolshani cried out, "I am under your mercy, Your Excellency!" It was the same scream the young victim had uttered in the field at midnight.

Quickly, Al-Jolshani was bound hand and foot. A gag was placed over his mouth to prevent him from screaming. He was led to the field at night, where a deep pit awaited him. Al-Jolshani was thrown into the pit and covered with earth to bury him alive. At the same time, the guard was strangled, and his body was thrown into the canal, where it would float to the surface three days later.

Al-Jolshani's family and son went searching for him everywhere, but there was no sign of him. A month after his disappearance, news arrived, describing exactly what had happened. The location where Al-Jolshani was buried

was discovered. The son went to inform the police.

A police officer and a group of soldiers arrived at the site and began digging. One of the wealthy man's men approached the officer and advised him to return safely to his wife and children. The officer then ordered the soldiers to fill in what they had dug and wrote in his report that the digging had yielded nothing.

The son went mad and swore revenge. He kept looking for a gun. He actually bought one from a gun dealer and entrusted it to my father. My father put the gun on a high shelf in the wardrobe. When my mother saw me playing with it, she was terrified and asked my father to return it to its owner, which he did.

The gun was small, about the size of a grown man's palm, metallic in color, and unloaded. After it was returned, it was never used. The son wasn't as wicked as his father. Later, the son requested a transfer to Cairo for work and forgot all about the whole thing.

But I never forgot this story, which was circulating in every house in our city in the late 1940s. Horror isn't just found in stories and novels; life itself is full of horror and cruelty. Which Hegel calls the terror of history.

8

Abu Ja'oura is a man in his late twenties. He works as a sieve maker. His shop is just steps from our house; it has a dirt floor and a tin gate. There, he sells the sieves and the baskets he makes.

Whenever a donkey dies in the area or in a neighboring village, Abu Ja'oura appears like a green fly that swarms around rotting carcasses. He rolls up his sleeves and begins skinning the donkey with a short, sharp knife called a "khinsar." He then takes the skin and spreads it out in the sun on the bank of the canal to dry. Afterward, while the skin is still soft, he cuts it into thin leather strips to make sieves.

A sieve is a wooden ring, about an inch or two thick, with a diameter of at least half a meter. It has closely spaced holes on the bottom through which the soft leather strips are threaded. They are then left to dry in the sun, stretching the sieve from all sides simultaneously. The sieve is used to sift grain and separate it from bricks, gravel, and small stones.

Abu Ja’oura was a bald man who wore a galabeya and

walked barefoot. Despite his unconventional profession of making and selling sieves, he was a passionate football player—an extraordinary goalkeeper.

West of Fakous, near the slaughterhouse, there was a spacious area where the Tuesday market was held, selling livestock and supplies to farmers from the villages and hamlets surrounding Fakous.

There was also a football field in the same place. As children, we used to go there to watch the amateur football team from Fakous train. Abu Ja’oura was one of the team members, a goalkeeper as fierce as a lion. He played barefoot, as usual, in his underwear.

While I was going to watch with the other children, I saw a donkey stuck in the mud in a newly irrigated low-lying area. Its owner was standing in the road, trying to pull the donkey by its tail to get it out. Another man was shouting at him, "Be careful, you'll cut off the donkey's tail, stupid!"

I also saw poor children sitting near the slaughterhouse. Barefoot, their robes stained with the blood of slaughtered livestock, each tied with a rope around his waist, they wait for the carcasses to be loaded onto donkey carts.

These children run after the carts, pretending to help push

them forward. Then, taking advantage of the owner's inattention, they steal small pieces of meat with a knife. They conceal the stolen meat through the neck opening of their robes, hidden inside their clothing.

The children sit by the slaughterhouse wall, each holding his haul of stolen meat in his lap, ready to sell. Poor women, unable to afford meat from the butcher, come to buy from these boys. After inspection, haggling, and bargaining, the child sells his haul for a piaster or two.

The price depends on the type of meat, the amount of offal and fat, and the number and size of the stolen pieces. The price of stolen meat is much cheaper than that of meat at the butcher's, which used to sell for 11 piasters per pound of boneless veal.

One of these children, finding the number of meat pieces and the quantity too small to entice the women to buy them, slyly tore a hole in his robe and placed the stolen meat in his lap. Then he extended his penis and testicles through the hole among the meat, so that the quantity would appear sufficient to any woman who saw it. Of course, this is something that only happens in Egypt.

There was a football match between the cities of Mansoura and Fakous. Mansoura played in the national

league, a level far superior to that of the amateur team from Fakous. But during the match, Abu Ja’oura was like Adel Heikal in the Egypt-Benfica match in the sixties, or Essam El-Hadary in the African Cup of Nations.

Abu Ja’oura stood barefoot in front of the goalpost, as usual, like a giant. He flew like Superman to clear the ball from the top corners and dived to the ground to keep it out of the bottom corners. A miracle by any measure. Abu Ja’oura saved his goal from certain goals, including a penalty kick. The result was an unexpected victory for Fakous over Mansoura.

I still remember the Fakous fans carrying Abu Ja’oura on their shoulders, his head adorned with a triumphal arch of flowers, like Julius Caesar in his time. They paraded him through the city streets, chanting: "Oh, you who dye the tail of a sparrow, Fakous is Mansoura!"

The shops sprinkle salt, sweets, jasmine, and rose petals on the players, and on the victorious sieve seller, Abu Ja'oura, who is carried on shoulders. Whor makes a living by skinning dead donkeys and selling sieves. When I hear about the millions earned by football players today, I say, "May God have mercy on your soul, Abu Ja'oura.

" Fakous is famous for making a type of shoe called

"bolagh," singular "balgha." You'll even find a balgha shop between every other shop. The table the balgha maker works on is round and raised about half a meter off the ground.

The balgha maker uses two curved needles simultaneously to attach the leather to the sole of the balgha. The leather is usually made from buffalo hide. After piercing the leather and the sole with an awl, the balgha maker inserts the two needles through the same hole—one from the right and the other from the left—then pulls the two threads together using his fingers.

Because the entire process is manual, without the use of machinery, and pulling the thread requires considerable physical effort, the fingers of the maker become calloused and resemble elongated potatoes. This industry came to Egypt during the Fatimid era with the Maghrebi people who settled in Fakous.

This type of comfortable shoe suited the flat feet of the peasants. Therefore, it spread widely until it became a national shoe. Initially, it was not possible to distinguish the right from the left shoe. Then, the people of Fakous developed it, and it became available in various shapes and colors, and the fame for balgha production reached all parts of Egypt.

Azzouz and Farouk El-Hindi are two young men who, along with their father, repair kerosene stoves. They don't have a shop; they sit on the sidewalk. In front of them is an old wooden table with a welding torch and the tools necessary for the trade.

A fight broke out between them. It escalated into a physical altercation. The older brother glanced sideways at the younger brother and said, "Get out of here!" The younger brother replied, "What do you mean, 'out of here'? We're both out right here on the sidewalk, in the same boat!"

The kerosene stove was invented by a French cook named Alexis Sueur in 1849 while he was in London. It was initially called the "magic stove." In 1892, it began to be manufactured in Stockholm, Sweden, under the name "Primus stove."

It consists of a small copper tank for kerosene, mounted on three legs. It has a piston for compressing the air. At the top, in the center, is an opening where a nozzle is attached. The nozzle has a hollow, coiled tube with a thin hole in the center that allows the kerosene to flow out. This opening is called the nozzle.

When the air in the tank is compressed by the piston, liquid kerosene initially flows out of the nozzle. When the kerosene is lit, the burner head heats up, and the gas then escapes as steam, burning continuously and providing the flame needed for cooking.

We didn't know about modern gas stoves and ovens that run on methane. Because the Primus stove was so inexpensive, it was a staple in every home, whether in the city or the countryside, at that time. It did cause accidents when it exploded due to pressure inside the tank and the base breaking off.

A few hundred meters from our house stood a four-story building. On the ground floor lived the family of a merchant who owned a shop. One day, while the wife was cooking for her children and husband, a fire broke out due to the explosion of the Primus stove. It killed the woman and her four children.

The merchant's friends quickly gathered. Some took care of the necessary arrangements for the burial, setting up the mourning tent and bringing in reciters of the Quran. Other friends simply gathered around the grieving merchant.

They took him by car to Cairo to visit all the famous

shrines and grand mosques, and they didn't return with him until the next day. How could a frail human being endure such a calamity without faith and submission to God's will?

At the end of the street is the shrine of the Great Jerbi. And in a narrow side alley is the shrine of the Small Jerbi. It's a small shrine with a niche at the top for a lit candle, seemingly for a child.

The shrine of the Great Jerbi stands in the middle of the main street, interrupting its straightness. Therefore, the street curves around it as if embracing it. People seek blessings by visiting the shrine, praying, and placing some money in the offering box. One of the stories I heard about Sheikh Jerbi is this:

During World War II, German planes dropped a bomb the size of a large earthenware jar on the Jerbi shrine. Before the bomb hit the ground, people saw a man wearing a white robe emerge from the shrine. A halo of light emanated from his face and head. He picked up the bomb in his arms and gently placed it beside him on the ground. Then he returned to the grave to continue his eternal sleep.

My little brother was delayed in speaking. My mother was

worried, but the advice from relatives and neighbors was that the solution was to beg for him from house to house. My mother left it to the neighbors to handle.

The neighbors took my little brother and put him in a basket. Two girls from the neighborhood held the basket by its handles and went knocking on doors, asking what kind and generous people might give. One house gave him a loaf of bread, another a slice of watermelon, and yet another two grilled fish.

Of course, my brother, who later became a general manager and managing director of one of the largest public sector companies in Egypt, doesn't remember this amusing story and doesn't know that I'm writing about it before it fades into oblivion.

We are now in the month of Ramadan. Ramadan used to fall in the late 1940s, during the sweltering summer. In front of our house, there was a makeshift oven for making kunafa.

It was a large, round copper tray resting on a round mud-brick base, raised about a meter and a half or two meters off the ground. There was an opening under the tray where the fire was lit.

The baker would pour the batter into a large cone with holes in a straight line at the bottom. Then, the batter dripping from the cone is sprinkled onto the hot tray in parallel circles.

Kunafa and qatayef are considered royal dishes and are among the most popular dishes during Ramadan. They were traditionally made from wheat dough, cooked in ghee, filled with nuts or cream, baked in the oven, and then drizzled with a thick sugar syrup.

It is said that kunafa originated in the Syria. It was made especially for Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan when he was governor of Syria, and it was called "Muawiyah's Kunafa." It is also said that it was made especially for Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad caliph.

Another account states that it is an Egyptian creation, presented as a gift to the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah upon his entry into Cairo, where he was greeted with lanterns during Ramadan. It then spread to counters. Imam al-Suyuti wrote a treatise on kunafa and qatayef called "Manhal al-Latā'if fi al-Kunafa wa al-Qatayef" (The Source of Delights in Kunafa and Qatayef).

As for qatayef, its history also dates back to the late Umayyad period, and it may even predate kunafa. It is

also said that it was invented during the Mamluk era, when confectioners competed to create new varieties. One of them invented a qatayef pancake filled with nuts and presented it beautifully on a large platter for guests to pick. This is where the name qatayef comes from.

I can still smell the aroma of kunafa and qatayef every Ramadan. And I also smell the ice blocks in the shop behind the kunafa oven. I smell the street dust and the scent of watermelon on the tables. And the aroma of pickled vegetables, apricot paste and its syrup, qatayef (stuffed pancakes), and nuts. Also, the smell of empty Pepsi and Coca-Cola crates and bottles on the sidewalk.

Pepsi was new; we hadn't seen it before. One bottle was the size of two and a half Coca-Cola bottles. It sold for the same price as a single Coca-Cola bottle, one and half piasters.

Pepsi came in three varieties: extra sweet, regular sweet, and light sweet. There were markings on the back of the bottle—a triangle, a circle, and a square—to indicate the sweetness level.

A new German drink called "Sinalco" also appeared, similar to cider. There were also local sparkling waters, Lemon and Abdel Ghaffar's Cider, which didn't last long.

There was also a soft drink, owned by Mr. Espiro Spats and manufactured in Alexandria. It was a lemon-soda drink; I don't think it's available anymore.

The grocery stores sold boxes of cocoa imported from England and boxes of Turkish delight. And the "Shishm El-Deek" (a type of medicine) was used to treat conjunctivitis and red eyes. Tobacco, molasses, cigarettes of all kinds, and matches were also sold. Sacks of nuts, seeds, peanuts, carob, and spices were placed in front of the grocery stores on the sidewalk.

A customer would go to buy a can of salmon or sardines and ask the grocer to open it for him. The grocer would then add oil and vinegar to the opened can as an extra act of generosity. Before the customer left, he would ask for some seeds on top of the purchase. The seller would then scoop some seeds from the sack in front of the shop and give them to the customer for free. All of this cost little, two piasters or three.

Grilled sardines were sold in baskets and containers on the street sidewalk. Dates were sold by the women sitting on the sidewalk during their season, and they were sold by the sack. Mulberries and sycamore figs were also sold.

The local bread was called "al-mufaqqa'a." The loaf would come out of the oven puffed up like a balloon, so the baker would press it in the middle with an empty jug to release the trapped air, then sprinkle it with water and return it to the oven. So that a crisp, shiny loaf would emerge, pleasing to the eye, and eaten plain without dipping.

The baker took great care in his craft, and we felt abundance and prosperity everywhere. This is what our ancestors called blessing. So where has this gone? Where has the blessing disappeared to?

9

I'm currently in Fakous Primary-Secondary School for Boys. Primary school is four years long. English is taught in the third and fourth years. Secondary school was five years long and divided into science and arts tracks. Next to the boys' school was the girls' school.

It was the late 1940s, and I was still in primary school. The day I received my books was a day of celebration for me. For some reason I don't know, I loved books and was obsessed with them. So much so that, even before starting school, I would go and buy a reading book just to look at the pictures in it.

The school provided us with books for free, as well as notebooks of all kinds: lined notebooks, single-page notebooks, English and drawing notebooks, pencils, quills, quill nibs for writing in ink, rulers, and erasers that said "Egyptian Government" or "Ministry of Education." The back cover of each notebook had a page of instructions or multiplication tables. Instructions like: "Go to bed early and wake up early," or "Wash your hands before and after eating," etc.

One day, a teacher came to class on a very cold day. He

found a student wearing only a shirt, without a sweater or jacket. He spoke to him gently, "My son, it's cold outside, and you're wearing such a light shirt. You'll get sick."

But the student came the next day in the same clothes. The teacher became angry and said, "Didn't I tell you to wear warm clothes? You still come in this light shirt?" The student replied, "Sir, I have nothing else to wear."

The following day, the teacher brought a paper bag containing a new sweater for the poor student and gave it to him after making sure it fit. When the student hesitated to accept the sweater, the teacher said, "My son, I'm like your father." And indeed, in those good old days, the teacher was like a father to the student.

Tawfik Effendi, the Arabic teacher, was a calligrapher without equal. His Arabic calligraphy in all its forms adorned the teachers' rooms and the headmaster's office. He knew my father, but he didn't know me. One day, I had a fight with another student, as was common among students my age.

The mean student went, tears streaming down his face like crocodile tears, to complain to Tawfik Effendi, the class teacher. Tawfik Effendi summoned me and asked my name. When he learned that my father was Tawfik Effendi,

who worked at the Credit Bank, he slapped me, saying, "Brother, your father is my friend, and why you are a filthy rascal?"

The prevailing method of education and upbringing at that time was the use of punishment and beatings if necessary.

The idea was to raise boys to be tough, manly, honest, courageous, trustworthy, and to learn the etiquette of dialogue and good listening. The concept was to expose our children to wind, sun, rain, cold, and danger so that they would become tough and rid themselves of any signs of weakness or softness in their clothing, food, drink, and behavior. The goal was to create a strong, responsible young man instead of a weak, effeminate one.

They taught the boys patriotism and peaceful coexistence, so that throughout my entire schooling, I never knew any difference between a Muslim and a Copt. I used to sit next to Mukhtar Mikhail Boctor, who later became a doctor and emigrated to Canada in the early 1970s.

My favorite teachers were Khalil Afandy, the math teacher, who instilled in me a love for the subject, and Mitri Afandy, the English teacher, who told us about the glories of Pharaonic Egypt and introduced me to the legend of Isis and Osiris.

Of course, I will never forget the kindness of my Coptic professors at university: Dr. Meltiadi Hanna, Dr. Fahmy Ibrahim, and Dr. Makar. Who among us hasn't been taught by Coptic teachers or treated by Coptic doctors? And which Coptic brother hasn't experienced the same with Muslim teachers or doctors?

The Arabic language teachers differed from the other teachers in their dress, appearance, and teaching style. This was due to their different educational backgrounds. The Arabic teacher was often educated at Al-Azhar or a religious institution, while the other teachers were graduates of Egyptian universities.

Therefore, we would find the Arabic teacher wearing a turban, a robe, and a caftan, or a suit, fez, and tie. However, the suit was often tight and un-ironed, the tie old and stained, the knot was too large, and the colors mismatched. The shirt was missing one or two buttons and open in the middle, and the colors clashed.

The Arabic teacher's teaching style also differed. He tended to be strict and used corporal punishment more often. He emphasized memorization and recitation. More stern, he demanded complete respect and blind obedience from the student.

Al-Alfi Effendi, my Arabic teacher, found me reading the satirical magazine "Al-Ba'kouka" while he was explaining a lesson. He asked me about the topic, but I was completely absorbed in the characters of "Al-Ba'kouka," Omm Sahloul, Dr. Maksourian, and the latest jokes.

The teacher flew into a rage and attacked the magazine like a wild beast. He tore it up and threw it in the trash. After his outburst subsided, he gave us a lesson in manners and etiquette, emphasizing the necessity of listening attentively and obeying blindly when the teacher was explaining.

The history of satirical journalism dates back to the era of Khedive Ismail in the 19th century. Ya'qub Manou' published the first satirical newspaper, "Abu Naddara," in 1876 in Cairo. It was written in colloquial Arabic and featured caricatures. It criticized Khedive Ismail and his policy of borrowing from Europeans.

Then, in 1891, Abdullah al-Nadim launched the newspaper "Al-Tankit wal-Tabkit" (Jokes and Reproaches). This literary and educational newspaper addressed criticism with a satirical approach. It opposed the British occupation, defended Classical Arabic, and advocated for its preservation. This led to al-Nadim's exile to Jaffa in

Palestine.

When al-Nadim returned to Egypt during the reign of Khedive Abbas Hilmi II in 1892, he founded the newspaper "Al-Ustaz" (The Professor). He continued his opposition to the British occupation, which resulted in his second exile to Jaffa.

At the beginning of the 20th century, many humorous magazines and newspapers were published. They attracted famous writers such as Bayram al-Tunisi and Hussein Shafiq al-Masri, whose humorous style appealed to readers.

In 1900, Muhammad Tawfik launched the magazine "Hemaret Munyati" (My Donkey's Desire). In 1907, Ahmed Hafez Awad launched the magazine "Khayal al-Zill" (Shadow Play), which included caricatures. Magazines such as "Al-Sayf" (The Sword) and "Al-Sayf wal-Masamir" (The Sword and the Nails) also appeared, employing satire and witty remarks to criticize the government.

Then, in 1921, the most famous satirical magazine, "Al-Kashkoul," appeared, owned by Suleiman Fawzi. It was a political satire magazine that attacked the leader Saad Zaghloul and criticized the Wafd Party's policies through caricatures and humorous articles.

Later, magazines such as "Al-Baghbaghan," "Al-Saif," "Al-Nas," and "Al-Masameer" also appeared. In 1928, Badi’ Khairy published a humor magazine called “Alf Sanf”, and in 1930, the weekly humor magazine “Al Matraqa” was published, which was the mouthpiece of the Wafd Party, which opposed the government of Sidqi Pasha.

In 1934, Mahmoud Ezzat El-Mufti launched the magazine "Al-Radio" (The Radio). It later became "Al-Ba'kouka" (The Little Scoundrel), which was famously torn up in class by Al-Alfi Effendi, the Arabic teacher.

Dar Al-Hilal had previously published the humor magazine "Al-Fukaha" (Humor) in 1926, which was later merged with "Al-Ithnayn" (Monday), a magazine that combined seriousness and humor. How much we need humor magazines today to bring smiles back to sad faces! As for children's magazines, the first one published in Egypt was in 1893, called "Al-Madrasa" (The School). It consisted of only a few pages related to school subjects.

In 1952, Dar Al-Maaref published what was arguably the greatest and most beautiful children's magazine ever published in Egypt, "Sindbad." It was distinguished by its high quality and seriousness, adhering to and writing in classical Arabic. For ten years, it was edited by Mohamed

Said El-Erian, and its illustrations were by Hussein Bekar and Morelli.

At the same time, "Ali Baba" magazine was published, though it was of a lower standard and less widely distributed than "Sindbad." In 1956, Dar al-Hilal published Samir magazine, which relied on foreign stories of poor quality. That same year, Mickey Mouse magazine was launched and continues to be published today. Its exotic themes are entirely unsuitable for the Egyptian character.

In 1977, "Sandouk al-Dunya" magazine was published in collaboration with the Franklin Foundation. In 1983, "Al-Muslim al-Saghir" magazine was published by the Muslim Family Association.

Educational curricula and textbooks were developed by prominent literary figures and leading educators such as Ahmed Amin, Taha Hussein, Abdel Aziz al-Bishri, al-Mazini, al-Aqqad, Ahmed Taymour, Mahmoud Taymour, and others. These curricula aimed at sound upbringing, instilling moral values, and cultivating a sense of national identity, alongside academic and physical education.

The prescribed books were of high literary and educational value, such as Kalila Wa Dimna by Ibn al-Muqaffa', Al-Akhlaq by Ahmed Amin, and Adab al-Dunya Wa al-Din by

al-Mawardi, among others.

Radio programs were carefully selected, purposeful, and entertaining, such as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "Qism, and Ma'rouf the Cobbler," "Baba Sharo," "At the Corner," and others.

Songs and music were of the highest caliber and refined taste. Singers like Omm Kalthoum, Abdel Wahab, Farid al-Atrash, and Laila Murad, among others, were featured. No singer, composer, or songwriter dared approach the radio unless their artistic level and performance were exceptional.

Films were also purposeful, entertaining, and contributed to sound education. Homes still preserved the noble values inherited from thousands of years ago. Religious scholars were moderate in their rulings and interpretations. Therefore, the Egyptian people in this golden age were surrounded by all that was great and noble.

After the first term exam in Arabic, I asked one of the students how he did. He replied that he found the exam easy, which allowed him to answer all the questions. This means I'll fail this exam because I didn't answer enough questions to pass. What should I do?

Of course, every problem has a solution. At such a young age, we don't consider the consequences properly, nor do we appreciate them fully. And then the accursed devil came along and suggested a diabolical idea to me. I acted on it immediately.

I waited until the school day ended and the students had left, then I went to the teachers' room. I found it empty, with all the class notebooks on the Arabic teacher's desk, waiting to be marked and graded.

I didn't hesitate for a moment; the fear of failing was the only thing on my mind at that moment. I grabbed all the notebooks and ran out of the teachers' room and the school.

What was I going to do with them? I couldn't take them home. The only solution was "Abdo, the sunflower seed vendor." He buys old newspapers, books, and magazines to make sunflower seed wrappers from the paper. I went to Abdo to offer to sell the notebooks.

The man hesitated and asked me, "Why do you want to sell these notebooks, son?" I replied that they were no longer needed after the school term ended. He pretended to agree and told me to come back the next day to collect

the money.

The next day, I found the school in a state of emergency, like a beehive. The janitors were running around, entering classrooms one after another, accompanied by the Arabic teacher. I was the only student who knew what was happening at the school.

An hour or two after classes began, someone knocked on the classroom door. The teacher opened it, and the headmaster entered, followed by the Arabic teacher and, behind them, " Abdo the sunflower seed vendor."

I was sitting at the first desk in the first row, right by the door. Abdo, the sunflower seed vendor, stood there in his traditional robe and bright red fez, his protruding belly right in front of my face, and began to scrutinize each student, one by one. Because God commands my safety, and because Abdo was so close to me, he didn't see me. He said to the headmaster, who was standing there watching, his eyes blazing with anger, "No, he's not here." Then he went out to look for the thief in the other classrooms.

Of course, I don't want to describe my state of mind to the readers at that moment. I don't think I've ever experienced such terror in my life. I kept thinking to myself, "Oh, if only Abdo had seen me!" Anything but that. This awful thought

haunted me for several nights; I couldn't sleep or get rid of it.

The strange thing is, I passed the exam and got a higher grade than the student who told me he answered all the questions, the very student who was the cause of this terrible predicament.

Such things happen frequently with children. They occur during the formative stages of their ego and the beginnings of their conscience. Therefore, we must be careful in how we deal with children so that we can help them develop psychologically and overcome these problems without causing them psychological scars or distortions that will haunt them into adulthood.

10

In 1952, our school organized a trip to Cairo for the students during the mid-year break. The trip cost fifty piasters, which included transportation, accommodation, and meals for a full week. The trip was supervised by Mr. Qadi, the history teacher, along with another teaching assistant. No more than twenty students participated.

The journey was by train from Fakous to Cairo. It was my first time seeing Cairo. We stayed at the "Misr" Hotel in Ataba Square. Misr Hotel wasn't a five-star hotel; it could be considered a budget hotel. But Cairo at that time was a truly five-star city.

If there is such a thing as love at first sight, that was my feeling towards Cairo when I first saw it. It wasn't as crowded as it is now. Its streets were spotless, as if washed with soap and water. The marble shopfronts, glass display cases, lighting, and beautiful decorations spoke of wealth, authenticity, and grandeur.

The shop signs were delicate, written in letters of light. The neon lights, with their harmonious colors and bright glow, delighted the eye. The straight streets ended in spacious

squares adorned with bronze statues and flowers. The tram lines running through the streets added to their beauty and charm.

Our room, which could accommodate four students, was in the Hotel Misr, overlooking Ataba Square. Next to it lay Azbakeya Garden, and beyond it, the Khedivial Opera House, which burned down in 1971. After a short tour of nearby Cairo landmarks, we had dinner at a restaurant and then went to our rooms to sleep.

But how could we sleep in Cairo? The bustle of the square, the noise of cars and trams constantly reminded us that we were in a vast, magnificent city. Lampposts, shops, and neon signs cast their changing lights, illuminating parts of the room's walls with shifting colors.

We entertained ourselves before bed with stories, tales, and jokes. One of the jokes I still remember is this:
"A miser had four dates fruit. He opened the first date by lamplight and found a worm inside. He threw it away. Then he turned off the lamp and ate the remaining three dates."

Cairo is a great city that has developed over the centuries. It was called the City of Battle, "Heri Iy" six thousand years BC. Then it was City of the Sun, "On" or "Heliopolis," four thousand years BC. Then it became the city of Fustat, built

by Amr ibn al-As in 641 A.D. to house his soldiers. Later, the city of al-Askar during the Abbasid era. Then al-Qahera during the time of Ahmad ibn Tulun, where the famous Ibn Tulun Mosque is located.

When the Fatimids conquered Egypt and wanted to build a walled city, their commander, Jawhar al-Saqilli, gathered astrologers and ordered them to choose an astrological sign to dig the foundation north of Fustat and another to throw its stones. They fixed wooden posts to the wall and connected these posts with ropes from which bells were hung. So that the builders would throw stones when the bells rang.

It so happened that a stray crow landed on one of these wooden beams, and the bells rang. The builders thought it was the signal to begin laying the foundation stone for the wall.

The astrologers cried out, "No, no! Mars is in the astrological sign. This is not a good omen." When Al-Muizz li-Din Allah Al-Fatimi came to Egypt and heard the story, he liked the idea, so he named the city “Cairo”, and it became “Cairo of Al-Muizz” instead of the proposed name, which was “Al-Mansouria”.

The hotel where we stayed in Ataba Square was located

outside of Cairo of Al-Muizz. Ataba Square, and indeed the rest of downtown Cairo, was barren land, a series of ponds and swamps all the way to the Nile. It was often flooded. The development of downtown Cairo is attributed to Khedive Ismail and his minister, Ali Pasha Mubarak.

At the beginning of Khedive Ismail's reign, which lasted from 1863 to 1879, he visited Paris. He was deeply impressed by Parisian civilization and architecture. He then returned to Egypt determined to transform Cairo into another Paris on the Nile.

Of course, fate plays a significant role in the lives of nations. Meanwhile, the American Civil War was raging due to the issue of emancipating slaves. Consequently, there was a crisis in global cotton production due to the absence of American cotton.

Attention turned to Egyptian cotton, and its price soared. Egyptian cotton exports to the global market increased from $16 million in 1862 to $56 million in 1864. Cotton was to Egypt at that time what oil was to the Gulf states after the 1973 war.

The money was there, the will was there, the workforce was available, and the Khedive used to say, "My hobby is bricks and mortar." So, what was lacking? What was

lacking was expertise. Let's import the necessary expertise. Therefore, attention turned to the expertise of the Italians and French in urban planning and architecture.

At the same time, Khedive Ismail established the Irrigation and Engineering School in Abbassia, which later became the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University. He also founded the School of Arts and Crafts in Bulaq, which later became the nucleus of the Faculty of Engineering at Ain Shams University.

Ali Pasha Mubarak appointed Europeans, especially Italians, to the Ministry of Public Works and to projects related to construction and the planning of New Cairo, as well as the construction of the Khedive's palaces and private villas.

Some of the most prominent names are Francesco Battigelli, Carlo Brambolini, Berto Avoscani, Carlo Virgilio Sevagni, Luigi Gavas, Augusto Cesari, and Giuseppe Garozzo, who built the Egyptian Museum, Abdeen Palace, the Shepherd Hotel, and the fire station in Ataba Square, which can be seen from the window of the Hotel Misr.

Most of the buildings constructed by the Italians were in the style of Renaissance architecture, featuring Tuscan columns, Ionic buttresses, and windows and doors

adorned with statues.

French architects, on the other hand, were renowned for the French Baroque style, which appeared in some buildings in Cairo, particularly in the Garden City and Zahir districts. This style is characterized by delicate balconies, intricate ironwork, and decorative wrought ironwork on doors, windows, marble entrances, and walkways.

The French architect Barillier-Deschamps, along with Delchevallier, designed the Azbakeya Garden in the style of French gardens, and a collection of rare trees and plants from around the world were brought there. A small artificial lake was created there, with pedal boats for leisurely rides.

Several bridges were built across the lake. Along its banks, oriental tea houses, snack bars, a photography studio, a Chinese-style pavilion, a fencing school, a theater (the Azbakia Theater), and a shopping mall were constructed.

The Khedive offered vacant land in the downtown area for sale at a very low price, on the condition that construction take place within 18 months and that the cost be no less than 30,000 francs per building.

The Khedive ordered the construction of the Khedivial Opera House in Azbakeya in 1868, modeled after La Scala in Milan. It was built by the Italian Pietro Avoscani in five months to stage Verdi's Aida, with a libretto by Jean-François Champollion, director of the Egyptian Museum. However, the opera was not completed when the Suez Canal opened. Therefore, Verdi's Rigoletto was performed instead.

Qasr al-Nil Bridge was built during the reign of Khedive Ismail in 1871. It is the oldest bridge in Cairo, located near Tahrir Square, and is distinguished by the four lion statues at its two entrances. It was built by a French company and rebuilt in 1932 during the reign of King Fuad.

As for the Abu al-Ela Bridge, made of steel and completed in 1912 during the reign of Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, it is a common misconception that it was designed by the French engineer Gustave Eiffel, the builder of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. But this is untrue. The Abu El-Ela Bridge was built by the French company Fives-Lille.

One of the stories told about the Abu El-Ela Bridge is that when its engineer found it didn't open properly for boats, he committed suicide by throwing himself off.

This is also a complete fabrication. The bridge initially

opened and closed without any problems and was an engineering masterpiece that we failed to preserve. However, due to poor maintenance, it became impossible to open because of rust. The old Abu El-Ela Bridge was demolished in 1998 to build a new one in its place. As for the French engineer Eiffel, he built the suspension bridge at the Giza Zoo.

Giza Zoo was commissioned by Khedive Ismail and opened in 1891 during the reign of Khedive Tawfik. It featured imported flowers, plants, and trees. It housed approximately six thousand animals representing 175 different species, including rare types of crocodiles and wild cattle. It covers an area of 80 acres.

It boasted waterways, caves with waterfalls, and wooden bridges. There were also lakes for exhibited birds. The city also housed a rare collection of birds and reptiles, as well as a museum of stuffed animals, birds, and butterflies.

Cairo quickly became a city unparalleled in its grandeur, surpassing all others in the East and West, Europe and America. Ali Pasha Mubarak personally oversaw the design of its streets and squares, striving to make them even more magnificent than those of Paris.

One of Khedive Ismail's palaces, formerly reserved for visitors, later became the Shepherd Hotel. The tree-lined Pyramids Street once featured a rest house that was transformed into the Mena House Hotel.

The palace designated for royalty and dignitaries during the opening of the Suez Canal, located on the island now known as Zamalek, was where Empress Eugénie of France, the Crown Prince of Prussia, and other guests stayed. This palace is now the Marriott Hotel.

Shubra Street, lined with acacia and sycamore trees, was one of Cairo's most important thoroughfares, as the elite followed the Khedive's example in constructing luxurious villas and palaces along its sides.

But where have these architectural treasures gone? How did the French manage to preserve Paris's architectural heritage and transform it into a legend, while we have turned our own architectural treasures in the city center into neglected clinics, workshops, shops, and unsightly boutiques? Neglect, stupidity, and a lack of awareness have squandered exquisite and magnificent works of art that were once masterpieces of art, history, and culture.

Nearly three hundred buildings in downtown Cairo are left to succumb to filth, garbage, insects, rodents, and

dampness. Most have been converted into workshops, clinics, barbershops, and local cafes. They receive no basic care or maintenance. A fading memory of a country committing suicide.

The zoo, once considered one of the most beautiful in the world, had a large portion of its land taken to build the Faculty of Engineering, with all its buildings and laboratories, shrinking its area from 80 acres to a mere 357,000 square meters. With the continued destruction and disfigurement of the zoo, its international reputation has declined, and it has become one of the worst zoos in the world.

The Azbakeya Garden, established by French engineers and boasting 800 rare trees and a live music Koshk, has had its vitality destroyed, its plants killed, its pond filled in, and its area reduced until nothing remains.

Azbakeya Square has been divided into four sections. It now houses the new Central Bank building, a gas station, the Republic Garage, and two buildings for the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Health Insurance Authority.

As for the garden itself, it was divided, with the Opera House built on part of it, and 26th of July Street cutting through it, splitting it in two. Azbakeya Garden and Square

are no longer what they once were, becoming a memory of that bygone era.

Tahrir Garden, too, was converted into bus stations. The garden of Muhammad Ali Palace in Shubra, which once covered 50 acres, was considered one of Cairo's most magnificent and rarest gardens. Where is it now? The palace itself is one of the rarest in the world.

The garden of Prince Muhammad Ali, son of Khedive Tawfik, was world-renowned. And what about Sayyida Zeinab Garden, Al-Zaher Square Garden, the Darrasa Forest, the garden of Ahmed Maher's Mausoleum, the Qubba Gardens, the gardens of the Agricultural Museum in Dokki, and the Boulaq Gardens? All of that is gone forever, a thing of the past.

About two years ago, I was visiting Cairo. I went down to the downtown area to run some errands. Fouad Street, Suleiman Street, and the Azbakeya district. I couldn't believe my eyes. The sidewalks had been stripped of their tiles. Every shop had a sidewalk in front of it that was different from the one in front of the shop next door. Bricks, gravel, and sand are scattered everywhere.

The shop decorations reflect poor taste and an ugly haphazardness. Signs and doctors' advertisements deface

balconies and the walls of buildings that were once architectural gems. The streets are filthy, and garbage piles up everywhere. Even the people themselves have changed, becoming unsightly and indistinguishable from the places they live.

Cairo Cinema is now a ruin. The Metro Cinema shows Arabic films, but the advertisements surrounding it are repulsive and unpleasant. The cinemas owned by the Jaafar brothers in downtown Cairo before nationalization—Rivoli, Radio, Opera, and Qasr El Nil cinemas—with their beautiful stages, luxurious carpets, multiple velvet silk curtains, and magnificent decorations, have become ruins or shabby shops.

This is a defacement and destruction of treasures that don't belong to one generation, but to all generations. We must protect them and hold onto them fiercely. It is a heinous crime, premeditated and deliberate. No excuse can justify it. Whether the argument is poverty or ignorance of the meaning of life and beauty, it is unacceptable to claim a lack of understanding of the importance of civilization, culture, and the fine arts in the lives of peoples.

12

I was still in Cairo on a school trip at the beginning of 1952, shortly after the Cairo Fire. One of the teachers accompanying us pointed out of the bus window to some shops and buildings whose facades still bore the scars of the fire. I remember one of them: the Metro Cinema on Suleiman Street (now Talaat Harb Street).

We didn't know the cause of the Cairo Fire at the time. It happened on January 26, 1952. Within a few hours, the fire had consumed 700 places in the streets and squares of downtown Cairo. Shops like Cicurel, Omar Effendi, and Salon Verdi; hotels like the Shepherd, Metropolitan, and Victoria; cinemas like Metro, Radio, Rivoli, Diana, and Miami; car dealerships; cafes and restaurants like Groppi and American; social clubs; and so on. Twenty-six people were killed and 552 injured. A horrific crime and a devastating loss for a magnificent city like Cairo.

Suspicion fell on King Farouk, perhaps because of his desire to bring down Nahhas Pasha's government. The British were also accused of aiming to reoccupy Cairo after the Wafd government abrogated the 1936 treaty two years before the fire.

Neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the communist's party escaped accusations of setting Cairo ablaze. The Cairo fire was one of the factors that hastened the July 1952 Revolution.

We took a bus to Helwan to spend a full day there. At that time, Helwan was an upscale suburb of Cairo on the banks of the Nile.

Our school in Fakous had a teacher who had recently been transferred to Helwan. So, the bus driver kept driving through the streets of Helwan, looking for the school where the teacher worked. This gave us the opportunity to see almost the entire Helwan district.

I was struck by the beauty of the villas and palaces, from whose iron gates bore bougainvillea, jasmine, and other flowers. The Helwan district was dazzling with the cleanliness of its streets, adorned with white-stemmed trees and flowers hanging from lampposts.

We visited the wax museum, the sulfur spring, and the Japanese garden. We had a wonderful time, marred only by the discovery by the trip's teachers that two students were missing on the way back. Kadi Effendi and his colleague were terrified. They ran around searching for the

missing students to no avail. When all their efforts failed, they went, in a pitiful state, to report the matter to the police station.

Upon returning to the hotel, we were surprised to find the two students waiting for us. What had happened? They had experienced a sudden craving and had gone to a secluded spot to smoke a couple of Hollywood cigarettes. When they returned, they couldn't find the trip bus, which had left before anyone noticed their absence.

They decided to return to the hotel in Cairo on their own. The result, of course, was a severe beating, complete with whippings and curses. The responsibility for the loss of two students is undoubtedly a heavy one, reminiscent of Nour El-Sherif's film "The Last of the Honorable Men."

Helwan was originally a Pharaonic city, with a water dam in the Wadi Hof area dating back to pre-dynastic times. It was rebuilt by Abd al-Aziz ibn Marwan, the Umayyad governor of Egypt.

The historian Al-Maqrizi says that a plague struck Egypt, so Abd al-Aziz left and settled in Helwan. He liked it, so he lived there and developed it beautifully, planting palm trees and vineyards. The buildings continued to increase during his fifteen-year stay there.

In 1849, during the reign of Abbas I, the government sent some soldiers to Helwan for treatment in the sulfur springs. The success of this experiment greatly increased public interest in Helwan sulfur springs. Europeans and Egyptians alike began flocking to the springs.

In 1868, Khedive Ismail ordered the construction of a bathhouse at the site of the sulfur springs. During the laying of the foundation, the remains of an ancient basin containing four springs were discovered, believed to be the bathhouse mentioned by al-Maqrizi in his historical accounts.

In 1871, the new bathhouse was opened to utilize the sulfur waters. Egyptian and foreign visitors quickly flocked to the springs in numbers that exceeded all expectations. The health of Khedive Ismail's wife improved after she was treated in the sulfur waters, further enhancing Helwan's reputation. This prompted the Khedive to transform the area into a health resort.

During the reign of Khedive Tawfik, Helwan received special attention. He built a palace there, and most of Helwan's buildings were constructed during his era. Among the international figures who frequented Helwan were Prince Leopold, Regent of Bavaria; the Queen of

Austria-Hungary; the Queen of Sweden; the Prince of Wales; and Lord Cromer, the de facto ruler of Egypt during the British colonial period.

In 1917, Zulfikar Pasha established the Japanese Garden in Helwan. In 1934, the Wax Museum was moved there from Cairo. In 1939, another natural spring erupted within the garden.

The Japanese Garden was distinguished from other Egyptian gardens by its collection of famous Buddha statues. One of the amusing legends that Helwan children talk about these statues is that they represent "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." They came to rob Helwan Hospital and hid in the Japanese Garden. God punished them by transforming them into statues as a lesson to other thieves.

The Japanese Garden gained international renown due to its Japanese-style design. However, like other historical gardens in Egypt, it suffered from neglect and disrepair, eventually falling into a deplorable state. This prompted the Japanese government to intervene and offer to renovate the park at its own expense in the early 1990s.

After the revolution, Helwan transformed into an industrial city. Many of its landmarks and timeless palaces were

demolished. Once a city of refinement and beauty, it became vulgar, a city of pollution, haphazard development, and respiratory distress due to cement, iron, and steel factories, military factories, and Nasr car factory.

Thus, Helwan became one of the most polluted areas in the world, without rival. What harm is there in building factories far from tourist resorts and unparalleled treasures? Why can't factories be located away from populated cities and upwind? We need the wisdom machine of Salah Jaheen to explain this to us.

The next day, we went to Giza Square to catch the tram that runs along Al-Haram Street to the Pyramids. What I remember of Al-Haram Street at that time is its complete absence of cars and pedestrians. Trees lined both sides, and farmland stretched out. No cabarets, no streetcars, no traffic jams or gridlock.

Everything I saw on that trip was new and dazzling. Our humble minds couldn't comprehend it. We, students from rural areas and small towns, were given a cultural shock by Cairo's beauty and grandeur. The sight of the pyramids from afar, with fingers pointing at them, is unforgettable.

Luckily, we had a history teacher with us. He explained what we couldn't understand. The Great Pyramid is this

long, this high, how many stones are in it, and how many years it took to build. Kadi Effendi was working, and I was staring at this colossal structure, unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

One of the students interrupted the teacher, saying, "What happened to those ancient Egyptians, teacher? Were they cursed?" Judge Effendi replied angrily, "May God curse you and all the donkeys like you! They were our great ancestors, you idiot!" The student innocently replied, "So where did they go?"

This isn't a naive question from a young boy. It's a question I ask myself repeatedly. Where did they go? Are we truly the descendants of these people? Are the workers and engineers who built the pyramids related to us, even remotely? Is the Egyptian woman, with her jewelry, adornments, perfume, clothes, and musical instruments, related in any way to the modern Egyptian woman?

The Egyptian people built the Great Pyramid – the Pyramid of Khufu – during the Old Kingdom. We are not concerned here with the reasons for its construction, whether to immortalize the king or to provide employment for surplus labor during the Nile flood, as some scholars believe. What concerns us is the extraordinary precision and meticulous care taken in its construction.

The Great Pyramid was built on a perfectly flat, horizontal base, the degree of error in its flatness not exceeding four-thousandths of a percent. Or, to put it practically, there is no error at all.

The pyramid's base is square. Each of its sides faces one of the cardinal directions: east, west, north, and south. The error in the direction of the north and south sides is three-hundredths of a percent. The error in the direction of the east and west sides does not exceed nine-hundredths of a percent.

Could there be greater precision than this? The pyramid's stones weigh six and a quarter million tons. This is enough to build a wall encircling all of France. These stones were placed together with such precision that the gap between any two stones is no more than one-fifth of an inch thick.

Inside the pyramid is the King's Chamber. Below it is the Queen's Chamber. The King's Chamber has two windows or air passages. The first window allows light from the North Star to pass directly through, illuminating the king's body in its long rest. This is because the North Star is fixed in its position in the sky, unlike the other stars that revolve around it.

Thus, the king's body remains illuminated day and night. The other window, facing south, allows light from Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, to pass through. Sirius, which represented the goddess Isis to the ancient Egyptians, illuminates the king's sarcophagus only once a year. In this way, the king's soul, in its eternal slumber, can know how many years have passed.

The three pyramids were also placed not in a straight line as one might expect, but in a near-straight line to represent the position of the three stars that form the center of the constellation Orion, which represents the god Osiris.

Why did the ancient Egyptians pay such meticulous attention to precision in construction? Wouldn't it have been sufficient to simply pile the stones together in a massive mound, its peaks rising towards the sky? Why did the ancient Egyptians insist on a pyramidal shape, with its sides perfectly aligned with the cardinal directions? What was the secret behind this?

Why is it important that the ratio of half the perimeter of the pyramid's base to its height be close to the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, which is known to us as the value "π".

Is it true that the pyramid's location was chosen to be the center of the Earth, meaning that the meridian passing through the pyramid simultaneously traverses the largest possible area of land that any other meridian could cross, and similarly, the latitude passing through the pyramid also traverses the largest area of land?

Did the ancient Egyptians know that the limestone used to build the pyramid is composed of biological accumulations of microorganisms that lived in water millions of years ago? That is, every atom in the pyramid's structure once throbbed with life, like the remains of the king and queen resting within? Or is all of this mere coincidence?

What is the pyramid's connection to the sun? When the sun rises on the horizon, its golden rays begin to climb the eastern face of the pyramid, as if ascending to the heavens. As it begins to set, its crimson rays descend upon the western face of the pyramid until Ra disappears into the distant horizon.

How were these stones placed together so that their immense weight wouldn't press against the chambers, windows, and passageways inside the pyramid? How can one imagine six and a quarter million tons of stone being crafted with the skill of a jeweler?

This meticulous precision is not found in the works of later builders and artists, who were often accused of haste and ostentation in their artistic creations. A quick glance at the colossal columns of Karnak or the temple of Abu Simbel reveals how the ancient Egyptians, in later times, lost precision, care, and patience in their artistic endeavors, contenting themselves with sheer size and grandeur.

Another look at the unparalleled statue of Khafre in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, or the statue of Menkaure and his wife in the Boston Museum in the United States, illustrates the artistry and craftsmanship of the Old Kingdom.

If the precision of the pyramid's construction is considered miraculous, imagine the ingenuity of the management employed to operate such a vast workforce on a single project, ensuring their seamless coordination and harmony without any confusion or conflicting decisions or orders.

The ability to work collectively was a hallmark of our ancient Egyptian ancestors, a characteristic that, fortunately, manifests itself from time to time. It was evident when we dug the Suez Canal, when we built the Aswan High Dam, and when we crossed into Sinai during the 1973 war. And this will become clear when we rebuild our country on sound foundations in the near future, God

willing.

We err when we think, as Herodotus did before us, that the pyramid is merely a massive tomb for a tyrannical king who forced his people to build it. For the pyramid is, in reality, a religious temple, built for religious reasons, like the great mosques and churches built for the same purpose. It is a magnificent edifice that employed science, art, faith, devotion, patience, precision, and above all, love in its construction. For the chariot of civilization is not pulled by slaves, but is always and forever led by free people.

Farouk al-Hindi was one of the children who played with us in the street. He had a strange hobby; one I'd never heard of before or since. He would sneak up on any dog or cat he came across, grab its tail quickly, lift it into the air, and spin it around with his outstretched arm. When he let it goes, it would fall away and run off, completely bewildered.

Another child had a short rope tied to one of his legs, the end of which was a large onion. He would move the rope so the onion would spin around his leg. When the rope passed his other leg, he would jump over it. The trick was to keep his leg from touching the rope.

Another game we played, which I loved, was called "Seven Stones." We would dig seven holes next to each other by the wall and one large hole filled with gravel. Each of us had our own hole, chosen by lot.

We would stand in a straight line a reasonable distance from the holes. When it was our turn, each of us would roll a small ball into one of the holes. Whoever got the ball into his hole had to run quickly to the ball, pick it up, and throw it at one of the other players. Of course, whoever the ball doesn't land in his hole must run away quickly.

A pebble is placed in the hole of the player the ball hits. If the player fails to hit anyone, a pebble is placed in his own hole. The player who gets seven pebbles is the loser. The punishment is for the loser to stand with his back to the wall, extending his arm and palm against the wall. He then receives seven balls, which the other players aim at his palm as punishment.

The beauty of this game is that it teaches children alertness, anticipation, caution, and making the right decision at the right time. You can't get too close to the holes, because then you'll be an easy target for the ball. You also can't move away from the holes, because the ball might land in your hole.

Whether you get closer or further away is your decision and responsibility. It's a game that combines physical exercise with mental activity. Children learn to judge distances and make decisions from a very young age, in addition to exercising in the sunlight and fresh air. Computer games may be good for the mind, but they are harmful to the body and spirit.

There was a stray dog in our street. But she was a friend to all the street children. Just call her by her name, "Lucky," and she'll come running. She was a very intelligent and loyal Malinois, the kind used for herding livestock, police work, tracking, and search and rescue.

We'd run, and she'd run after us. We'd play, and she'd play with us. We'd stand still, and she'd come and rub against us. There was a mark on her neck, probably from a fight with another dog. Each of us considered her our own loyal dog. We'd bring her food from our homes, and she'd carry it and stand by the wall to eat it, her eyes never leaving us.

One dark, sad day, I found the street children crying. What happened? A child answered, tears streaming down his face, "I swear I'll kill that son of a bitch soldier!" The soldier tasked with killing stray dogs had come and thrown a poisoned kebab at Lucky. The dog suffered from the

poison as she fell to the ground, and the children around her cried and beat their faces until she died.

This wasn't the first time I'd lost a dog or a pet. We had another dog that was a gift to my father when we lived in a house with a small garden. She grew up with us from the time she was a small puppy, and she grew up not knowing anyone but us.

When my father moved from Fakous to work in a village in Sharqia, there was no room for our dog in our new home. When none of his friends were willing to take her, he had to leave her in the street. My father wouldn't listen to my pleas and tears. He would just reply, "My son, there's no room for her with us."

The scene I can't forget was when my father visited Fakous to buy some things, and I was with him. As we were heading to catch the bus back, our dog suddenly came and touched my father's leg, as if begging him to forgive her and take her back to her family, the only family she knew.

My father tried to chase her away, but it was no use. I cried and begged him to take her with him, but he kept repeating that there was no room for her in our small new house.

We went to the bus stop, and she followed us, not wanting to leave. The bus arrived, and we boarded. I looked out the bus window and saw her looking at me as if pleading with me to take her with us. The bus moved, and I saw her running after it. I watched her run after the bus until she disappeared into the distance, and I couldn't stop crying.

Dogs surpass humans in two ways: their sense of smell and their loyalty. The following story comes from Japan. Professor Ueno at Tokyo University had a dog named Hagito. The dog would accompany the professor to the train station early every morning and wait for his return in the afternoon.

While the professor was at the university, he suffered a heart attack that took his life. But Hagito remained at the station, waiting for his owner who would never return, refusing to leave.

People noticed the dog's continued presence at the station and learned his story. Many of them began feeding him. The station manager allowed him to stay and provided him with a place to sleep when he was certain he wasn't harming anyone. One of the deceased professor's students took the dog in and cared for him. But the dog remained loyal to his owner, the professor, going to the

station to wait for his return every afternoon.

The dog continued this routine for ten years. In 1935, the dog Hagito was found dead at the train station, in the spot where he usually waited for his owner. The Japanese government ordered that his body be preserved and placed in the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo.

It was 1952, and I was in my final year of elementary school. To ensure my academic progress, my father asked Qutb Effendi, a teacher at the compulsory school, to test me in arithmetic and Arabic.

Qutb Effendi took me aside to the courtyard. We sat on two chairs facing each other at midday. He held his umbrella over his head and asked me, "Give me a feminine singular pronoun that functions as the subject of a passive verb."

I glanced at his short tie, it’s very large knot, and his bright red fez, then smiled without answering. He asked another question, which I don't recall, and I responded with a smile and silence. He asked, and I smiled, my eyes fixed on the large knot of his tie. Suddenly, a resounding slap landed on my face, and my eyes rolled back, welling with tears.

Qutb Effendi's voice rang out: "What are you smiling at? Your own failure?"

Qutb Effendi went to my father to deliver the bad news. "Your son, Tawfik Effendi, will fail his primary school exams."

"So, what do we do, Qutb Effendi?"

The boy was very playful and never studied his lessons. The only solution was private tutoring.

Fortunately, there was still enough time before the final exam to prepare. The son of the headmaster of the compulsory school where Qutb Effendi teaches was in my class and was also preparing for his primary school final exam. Qutb Effendi was a godsend, saving our futures—mine and the headmaster's son's.

Despite his brightly colored fez, his peculiar tie, and his un-ironed suit, Qutb Effendi was a genius at teaching Arabic grammar and arithmetic. He was a graduate of Al-Azhar schools and had memorized the Quran and Ibn Malik's Alfiyya.

His teaching method was that the headmaster's son and I would go to the compulsory school every day after classes, even on Fridays and official holidays. Qutb Effendi would explain everything, and then we would solve every exercise in the ministry's textbook from cover to cover. Not a single problem or question would go

unsolved. His fee was one pound a month.

Of course, I neglected the other subjects and English. The English teacher in the class would only explain to two or three students and didn't pay attention to the rest. The class was unusually crowded.

My friend, the headmaster's son, with whom I studied, told me that his father had received his primary school results from the examination center before they were officially announced. He told me he had passed and received his primary school certificate. So, I asked him to check my name as well.

We went together to look for his father. I sat on the sidewalk and waited for him to bring my results from his father, who was visiting a neighbor. He went into the neighbor's house. After a short while that felt like an eternity, my friend came out, dragging his feet and taking two steps forward and one step back.

I looked at him as I drew lines in the sand with a stick I found nearby. I said to myself, "This gait never bodes well." He approached me and delivered the unpleasant news: "Your name isn't on the list." I asked him, "What does that mean? Did I fail?" He said, "Unfortunately, yes."

This was the first time in my life I felt the bitterness of failing an exam, or the bitterness of failure in general. When I went with my father to the school to find out why I had failed, the teachers who were there were surprised

that I had received a perfect score in math and a very high score in Arabic.

The reason for my failure was English. My father calmed down when he learned that my chances of passing the supplementary exam were high. And so, it was. After a short time, I passed the supplementary exam with the help of a private tutor. But the bitterness of failure still lingers in my throat.

I have hated anything called an exam all my life. When I have an exam, I can't sleep, eat, or live a normal life. How I wish humanity would discover something better than the exam system used everywhere.

Professor Peter taught me automation at the Courant Institute in New York City. The Courant Institute was founded by German scientists after they fled Nazi Germany, and by Italian scientists after they fled Mussolini's regime. The Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb, was conducted there, and it is considered one of the greatest institutes for the study of applied mathematics in the world.

Professor Peter used to give us Research was conducted at the end of each lecture. At the end of the term, there was no final exam. A student's grade was based on the sum of their research grades throughout the term.

Another professor, whose name I don't recall, taught us probability in mathematical statistics. He would give us the

final exam and tell us to go home and choose a suitable time. We would then begin answering the questions within two hours.

After that, we take the answer sheet and mail it to him to get the final grade. His opinion was that if your goal is simply to get a grade and pass, then you don't belong here. Graduate studies at an institute like the Courant Institute should be for those who seek knowledge, not just certificates.

In my view, the failure of education stems from our linking it to success, grades, and degrees. Let's imagine we created schools and universities without exams or degrees.

Students who only want a certificate wouldn't enroll in these institutions. They would be relieved of the burden. But the student who truly seeks knowledge will be the one who attends and strives to understand. And that's what we want.

From my personal experience, studying under the shadow of exams, passing, and failing causes immense psychological pressure and a terrible paralysis of the mind's powerful abilities. Have you ever heard of a student who invented something of value during their secondary or university studies? Discoveries and innovations always come from people outside the classical education system that relies on exams and certificates.

A student goes to school with the innocence of a lamb. He graduates as an expert in forgery and a master of lying and hypocrisy. I had a friend who would go to exams with cheat sheets stuffed in every pocket, inside his shirt, his shoes, and everywhere on his body he could fit.

Then he'd make a map showing the location of each cheat sheet according to the subject. Is such a student truly seeking knowledge? And should we feel sorry for him if he doesn't get a degree?

The United States implicitly doesn't recognize degrees. If a job opening is available at a computer company, for example, and someone with a PhD in computer science applies, along with someone who only has a high school diploma but possesses the necessary practical experience, which one will the company hire? The experienced one with the high school diploma. Why? Because here, we're looking for knowledge, not a degree.

In our countries, how do we wean students from the pursuit of degrees and instill in them a thirst for knowledge for its own sake? This is the great challenge that, if we succeed, will allow us to surpass other nations.

I don't believe the ancient Egyptians had a system of degrees. Yet, they excelled in everything and invented almost all the most important inventions known to humankind.

If abolishing certificates altogether isn't easy, then at least

they should be linked to the pursuit of knowledge. Students should be instilled with a love of learning from a young age, not just a desire for a certificate. Students come to class to learn. This is a genuine desire.

I've spent most of my life in classrooms, both as a student and a teacher, and I know exactly what I'm talking about. Students want to learn. But are we helping them achieve this desire?

I know some students who, due to flawed teaching methods, inane curricula, and poor-quality textbooks, wish they could leave school today rather than tomorrow and become drivers of Peugeots or bakery workers.

Education in our country relies on rote memorization and recitation without understanding. This strains the memory, paralyzes critical thinking, and stifles analytical faculties. As a child, I used to wonder about the value of teaching the congruence of triangles and similar theorems in plane (Euclidean) geometry at such a young age.

The answer is that training students in plane geometry theorems and solving related exercises at an early age is the best way to train their minds in logical thinking. If your thinking is not in a logical and organized sequence, you will not be able to prove anything, solve any geometric exercise, win any case, or arrive at any truth.

Training minds from a young age to think logically is what will uplift our nations and solve our social, political, and

economic problems.

The goal is to build capable minds, not minds that merely memorize unconnected information. Minds that understand, not minds that hold certificates and degrees without comprehension, like a donkey carrying books but not knowing what knowledge they contain.

Most teachers are unfit for this noble profession. Some pour material into students' minds like pouring liquid into a funnel, without reflection or consideration for each student's individual level of understanding. Others become obstacles to understanding and learning, and some, through their methods and incompetence, cause students to hate their subject and the entire educational process.

Do we teach our children the ability to critique? The ability to distinguish between facts and myths? To know which wind propels a ship forward or backward? Do we teach them that laboratory experiments can disprove a theory, but cannot prove its absolute truth?

Should we present them with all the different facets of issues and topics, so they can choose for themselves if they are able? And if they are unable, should we teach them the capacity for doubt? For only fools are blindly confident, certain, and will defend to the death the first idea or issue they encounter. As Dante said, "Doubt pleases me as much as knowledge."

Education is the most important issue facing any nation,

and I hope those in positions of authority will grasp this before it's too late.

14

The house we lived in during the late 1940s and early 1950s belonged to Sheikh Muhammad al-Thaqil. A medium-sized, red-faced man in his sixties, he lived with his elderly wife in an old mud-brick house behind ours. An old wooden door opened between the two houses, leading from our side to a small courtyard and from the other side to a large, earthen-floored hall.

From time to time, this shared door would open, and my mother and Sheikh Muhammad's wife would meet to chat or pay the three pounds we paid monthly rent. My mother sometimes used the landlady's traditional oven to bake bread or make pastries, cakes, and biscuits.

A close relationship developed between my mother and the landlady, and a strong neighborly friendship blossomed between them. When the landlady learned that my mother was suffering from kidney pain, she told her that she had a sister living in Cairo who would be visiting her soon.

This sister possessed a supernatural ability that none of us had. She could summon the spirit of Sheikh Zaidan, who had died centuries ago. Her father had also been able

to summon Sheikh Zaidan's spirit.

Before my father died, he asked Sheikh Zeidan to come whenever his daughter needed him. My father's relationship with Sheikh Zeidan began when he was living in Saudi Arabia in the 1920s, and it continued after he returned to Egypt.

One story my mother heard about Sheikh Zeidan was that he sometimes interfered in the affairs of the visiting woman's father. For example, he hid the father's turban when he had a fight with his wife and decided to leave home in anger. Another time, he pulled one of the sons from under the wheels of a speeding car that nearly killed him, leaving him unharmed. There are other stories I don't recall.

My mother told my father about the story of the woman who came from Cairo and the spirit of Sheikh Zeidan, who would come willingly at the woman's request. But my father didn't believe in these superstitions and continued to scoff, completely rejecting the idea of summoning spirits.

A short time later, the woman arrived from Cairo. The woman who owned the house asked my mother to come and ask Sheikh Zeidan's spirit about her kidney pain and to request his prayers for her recovery. My mother was

very frightened because she had never attended a séance before, and my father wasn't there to accompany her, so she had no choice but to take me with her.

I was no more than ten years old at the time, but I remember that day well. It was midday. My mother and I entered the house of Sheikh Muhammad al-Thaqil, the owner, through the shared door. We took off our shoes and sat on a mat on the dirt floor. Sheikh Muhammad, in his white robes and turban, was also sitting on the mat in front of us. Next to him were his wife and his sister-in-law, who had come from Cairo.

Sheikh Muhammad lit a fire in one of the clay stoves in front of us, then opened a small bag and took a little dry incense between his fingertips, placing it on the embers in the stove. Smoke rose and filled the room, and Sheikh Muhammad continued reciting the Quran and prayers. The woman, who was supposedly the only one capable of summoning spirits, didn't utter a single word.

Suddenly, a loud, clear voice came from all four corners of the room simultaneously. It said in the Bedouin dialect, "Peace be upon you and the mercy and blessings of God." The voice can be classified as a "tenor" voice, which is one of the male voices.

I felt my mother's hand grip mine tightly, squeezing it in fear. Sheikh Muhammad continued speaking to the spirit, asking it questions I don't recall, and the spirit answered with strength and clarity. When my mother mustered the courage to address the spirit, she said, "How are you, Sheikh Zeidan? How is your health?" The spirit replied sarcastically, "My health? My daughter, I died a long time ago. How are you all?"

I only remember some naive questions from my mother, like, "Why don't you go to the family home in the village?" But unfortunately, I don't remember the answer to that either. At the end of the session, Sheikh Zeidan's spirit left the gathering, but it hasn't left my mind to this day, and I think it never will as long as I'm of sound mind.

My father couldn't believe what had happened. He continued to refuse to believe in spirit summoning altogether. Faced with his persistent refusal, my mother asked her friend, the lady who owned the house, to invite him to a future session. And so, she did. From that time on, my father swore only by the miracles of Sheikh Zeidan and his profound secret.

My problem with this story is that it completely contradicts my way of thinking. I discovered from a very young age

that my thinking is rational. It seems to be an inherited trait from my grandfather. I have absolutely no difficulty understanding Euclidean geometry or other branches of mathematics. But I find it extremely difficult to accept anything that defies logic.

Then this story comes along and causes me uncontrollable intellectual confusion. What happened? Is Sheikh Zeidan's story real? Perhaps the whole thing was just a trick played by the woman and her sister.

But why? What would this woman gain from deceiving my mother if she wasn't receiving any material or moral reward? And what would motivate Sheikh Mohammed Al-Thaqil, a pious man who had performed the Hajj pilgrimage, to lie and deceive? And how could the voice come so loudly from the corners of the hall without microphones or electricity? This refutes the idea that the woman could speak through the psychic abilities of the ancient priests.

In the 1960s, the writer Anis Mansour went to Indonesia and brought back the craze for summoning spirits using a basket. This then evolved into using a coffee cup. No home or family was spared. Everyone was seized by this séance, trying to summon the spirits of their dead and ask them: Are they in heaven or hell? Or asking the spirits

about the future and what was hidden.

We heard that high-ranking officials summoned spirits to ask them, "When will we triumph over Israel?" (Mohamed Hassanein Heikal in Al-Ahram in the 1970s). Police and detectives at that time even searched for stolen goods and criminals by questioning spirits; I witnessed this myself. The séance society, headed by Professor Fahmy Abu El-Kheir and later by Dr. Ali Abdel-Galil Radi, a lecturer at the Faculty of Science, Ain Shams University, flourished.

Some of my university colleagues and I went to the Al-Ahram séance society, headed by Dr. Radi. He was also our professor, teaching us heat as part of our physics course at the Faculty of Science.

When we arrived at the society, Dr. Ali, the head of the society, told us that it was a day for spiritual healing, not for séances. He asked us if we would like to have a healing session.

The Al-Ahram Spiritual Society in the 1960s was located on a side street off Qasr El-Aini Street. The society occupied a small apartment. We sat in the living room, and in front of us was a row of wooden chairs, the "Afi" brand. Four patients were sitting on them, seeking treatment.

Sister Safsaf, the mediator from the association, arrived. She was thin and short, in her thirties, and dressed modestly with a white headscarf. She began touching the forehead, hair, and shoulders of the first patient with her fingers, murmuring inaudible words I couldn't make out. Then she moved on to the second and third patients and did the same. But nothing happened.

Sister Safsaf then moved to the fourth patient and began touching his forehead with her fingers and reciting prayers over him, just as she had done with the first three. Suddenly, without warning, the patient's breathing became rapid, and he began to gasp and struggle to exhale. He stood up and began screaming at the top of his lungs, while Sister Safsaf followed him with her fingers on his forehead, saying, "Come out of his finger!" He screamed and convulsed even more, and she insisted on the word "come out of the man's finger."

We sat terrified, watching this unfamiliar scene, not understanding what was happening before us. After that, Dr. Radi came and asked Sister Safsaf to slow down and end the session, suggesting she try again later.

Safsaf would command the evil spirit possessing the patient to leave his body, but the spirit would resist. This is what the head of the society, Dr. Radi, told us. We later

learned that the practice of séances had captivated his mind and thoughts while he was pursuing his doctorate in England, where he discovered a séance society.

Dr. Ali Abdel-Jalil Radi's interest in spirits began at that time. He used to say that he had an oil painting, and when its colors changed, it meant that a grave matter was about to occur. When his mother died, Dr. Radi noticed that the colors in the painting were unusually dark, gloomy, and sad. He believed this was due to the actions of certain spirits. I heard this story directly from Dr. Radi himself.

My personal experience with this subject of séances is that I initially believed in its validity. However, I noticed that when I carried the basket with my companions and summoned the spirit of a deceased person, and then asked it questions that only we knew, the spirits would answer with astonishing accuracy and correctness.

But when we asked the spirit questions that none of the basket-carriers knew, it would fail to answer. Since I possess an analytical mind, and I don't know whether this is a blessing or a curse, I tried to connect the correct answers that I know, but others don't, to the movement of the basket. I discovered that, without realizing it, I was unconsciously moving the basket. I found that it was my subconscious mind, not spirits, that was moving the

basket.

Modern psychology, what we know about mental illnesses, schizophrenia, and dissociative identity disorder, along with the research of Dr. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, on the subconscious mind and the primitive mode of thought, and his experiments on primitive humans in the African bush, explain what Sister Safsaf was doing.

As for the subject of spirits, they have ascended to their Creator and do not wish to return to this earthly world of ours, not through a basket, a cup, or anything else. We still know very little about the human mind. Because of this ignorance, we cannot explain many things that happen in our lives. For example, dreams that come true, fortune-telling with coffee grounds that comes true, telepathy, the power of belief, predicting the future, and other phenomena for which we find no explanation.

Such strange, unexplained phenomena are investigated by a new field of study called "parapsychology." Some major universities include it in their academic programs.

Curiosity led me to attend lectures on this subject at a New York City university. The professor was a woman specializing in parapsychology. During the lectures, she would collect stories from students about paranormal

events that had happened to them or their acquaintances.

I heard from one student about things disappearing from her house without explanation. Another student said that fires would also ignite for no apparent reason. I also heard about spirits manifesting as animals or humans. I seized this opportunity to ask the professor about my experience with Sheikh Zaidan. I found her listening to me with great interest. She then asked me to bring the woman who supposedly sOmmoned Sheikh Zaidan's spirit.

When she learned that it was a story from the early 1950s, she told me she had never heard such a story before. She promised to send it to all the parapsychology departments at the universities she knew to seek an explanation.

The strangeness of Sheikh Zaidan's story, from a parapsychological perspective, lies in the fact that the spirit manifests as a loud, clear voice. What parapsychologists are familiar with is the manifestation of a spirit as a faint spectral form, an aura of light, or some other shape. But for a soul to manifest as sound waves is unknown to them.

Parapsychologists explain the soul as simply energy emanating from the mind of the medium who summons it. Therefore, souls do not appear without a medium. The

human mind operates through chemistry and the separation of ions to generate electricity.

The amount of electricity in the human brain is enough to electrocute a large elephant. The eel-fish, which lives in the rivers of South America, hunts its prey by accumulating the electricity in its head and discharging it all at once into its victim's body.

Electricity is energy. If it finds the right field, it can travel at the speed of light. It can generate electromagnetic fields and waves, such as light, radio waves, X-rays, microwaves, and other radiation. All of these are diverse forms of energy that can be generated from electricity.

Is Sheikh Zeidan merely sound waves emanating from the subconscious mind of the Cairo woman, the sister of the homeowner? Or is he the spirit of a sheikh from the Hejaz who died centuries ago, appearing when the woman, the sister of the homeowner, requests him? To be honest, I don't know the definitive answer to this question.

I was playing on the sidewalk at sunset. My father came home, and I ran to him, asking, "Is it true, Father, that the King has stepped down from his throne?" He smiled and replied, "Yes, he stepped down from his throne and sat on

the ground."

For months, I'd been listening to the news on the radio. People gathered with rapt attention to hear the news of the successive cabinet reshuffles. For many days, I heard, for the first time, terms like "the Officers' Club crisis," "General Muhammad Naguib," and "the Free Officers." At my age, I didn't understand what was happening in the country.

After that, the radio at the grocery store across from our house played Omm Kalthoum's song "Egypt Speaks for Herself," with lyrics by Hafez Ibrahim, every night after the last news broadcast. I memorized it from hearing it so often. Especially its final verse, which is fitting for any revolution, and particularly the great January 25th Revolution, which says: "

I promised glory with all my father, from among my men, so fulfill my promise today, and raise my nation upon knowledge and morality, for knowledge alone is not enough.

We are passing through a situation where opinions falter, and a faltering opinion, leads to decline. So, stand firm in it, and anchor its sides with the resolve of the prepared."

Saeed Al-Waziri was my classmate in primary school in

the city of Fakous. He lived near our house in an old ground-floor house, with his mother, father, and two older brothers. His father worked in El Sapagh shop.

Two or three days a week, his father, who was thin and old, would take his bundle and spread it out in the neighboring markets to sell the goods it contained, which were needed by the farmers.

The eldest brother was married and worked with his father in El Sapagh shop. He and his wife lived independently, and then he rented a store on the main street opposite the Pasha's fez shop.

The second brother was also older than us and was studying at the intermediate teachers' school to become a primary school teacher. The mother was an elderly woman of a full figure. She was very generous, and whenever I visited her son at her home, she would never hesitate to share her food or sweets with us.

We had a classmate from one of the villages or hamlets near Fakous. I don't remember his name now. He kept begging us to visit him in his village. After getting permission from our families, we decided to go on a Thursday after school to visit our friend and return the following Friday afternoon.

Our friend wasn't with us on the day of the trip, but he had left us the address and a detailed description of what we should do: ask the bus conductor to drop us off at the large sycamore tree on the road in front of the village of Al-Ramadna. There, you would find someone waiting to take you the rest of the way.

We took the bus from the Fakous bus station heading towards Tell El Kebir. The British hadn't yet left Egypt and were encamped with their troops in the Tell El Kebir area.

At the sycamore tree, we asked to get off, following the precise instructions. The weather was wonderful after the light rain. The ground was wet, and the leaves on both sides of the road and the plants in the fields were washed by the rain. They appeared a bright green, reflecting the golden afternoon sun.

We looked right and left, but saw only two donkeys tied to the trunk of a sycamore tree. Where was the man accompanying us? No one. The road used by vehicles was a narrow dirt track. No vehicles passed, and no pedestrians were seen.

A clear blue sky, punctuated by a few brilliant white clouds tinged with a beautiful purple hue. Doves circled tall white

towers, their movements like a ballet at dusk. The common buzzard and the heron, with their pure white plumage and reddish-yellow legs, searched for an easy meal.

Sparrows flew around us, trying to discern the reason for our presence in this place, unchanged for millennia. A profound silence hung in the air; you could almost hear the inhalation and exhalation, the sound of the air entering your ears. The silence was broken only by the bray of a donkey here, the bark of a dog there, or the distant call of one farmer to another.

After a while, a young farmer suddenly appeared, as if from the earth, wearing a blue robe and a white cap, holding a short, thin stick. When he saw us, he hurried over to greet us. "Excuse me for being late," he said. "I just had to run an errand and be right back."

The donkey is white, taller, more expensive, and healthier than other donkeys. It's like the Mercedes or BMW of the donkey world. It's commonly used for riding and for breeding mules. The donkey, in general, is a domesticated member of the horse family, but smaller in size, with a shorter tail and longer ears.

A female donkey is called “atan”, and a young one is

called “gahsh”. The donkey is the Greek god of wine: Dionysus. It possesses patience, endurance, keen hearing, and can memorize rough roads on the first try. It's very intelligent, cautious, affectionate, playful, and learns easily. Describing it as stupid is completely inaccurate.

It's the symbol of the American Democratic Party. Tawfik al-Hakim wrote a book about it called "The Donkey of the Wise Man." There are 44 million donkeys in the world, 11 million of which are in China alone. Al-Farazdaq wrote a poem satirizing Jarir:
"We strike the head of every tribe, while your father sits behind his atan, picking lice.”

Mating a male donkey with a female horse produces a mule. The reverse produces a “naghl”. The problem with mules is that they cannot reproduce. The reason is purely biological. A horse's cell contains 64 chromosomes, which carry the genetic information, while a donkey's cell contains 62. Mule or naghl cells are incapable of dividing and forming an embryo.

Humans have 23 chromosomes, and chimpanzees have 24. One of the human chromosomes is actually two fused chromosomes. This illustrates the close relationship between us and chimpanzees. Note here that the similarity in the characteristics of different organisms depends on

the similarity in the number of chromosomes between them.

A well-known story about a donkey:
A neighbor came to Juha to borrow his donkey because the neighbor's donkey was sick. Juha apologized, saying the donkey was in the field. At that moment, Juha's donkey brayed from inside the house. The neighbor said, "That's your donkey, Juha! How can you deny it?" Juha replied, "Good heavens! You disbelieve me and believe the donkey!"

Another story: A lion, a fox, and a donkey agreed to hunt together and divide the spoils fairly. The lion hunted a gazelle and asked the donkey to divide it among them according to their agreement. The donkey divided the meat equally and perfectly.

The lion became angry and attacked the donkey, tearing him to pieces. Then he said to the fox, "You divide it instead of this poor wretch." The fox gathered the donkey's and gazelle's meat and placed them in one pile. Then he placed the donkey's tail in another pile. He said to the lion, "You choose, my lord." The lion smiled and said to the fox, "Who taught you the art of fair division?" The fox replied immediately, "The donkey, my lord."

Third story: There was a man who regularly crossed the border with a donkey and a box full of straw. Each time, the customs officer became suspicious and searched him and the box. But finding nothing, he allowed him to cross. After several years, the customs officer retired.

While walking along the road, he happened to meet the man with the donkey and the box. He addressed him, asking, "I know you've been smuggling something across the border. Would you please tell me what you've been smuggling? I promise I won't tell anyone." The man simply replied, "Donkeys."

Saeed al-Waziri and I mounted the two donkeys, which were equipped with new, ornate saddles and appeared healthy and well-fed. The donkeys walked one behind the other between the fields along the edge of the narrow irrigation canals, where there were no tracks or clear landmarks, for a considerable distance.

All trace of the dirt road that the carts traveled on disappeared behind us. Our companion reassured us that we were nearing our destination and entertained us with tedious talk to pass the time, none of which I remember now.

Suddenly, the outlines of the village began to appear. A

small minaret and dovecotes stand before the peasants' houses, roofed with cotton, corn, and rice straw. The village, as I recall, was called Al-Ramadna.

Al-Ramadna is not located on any road used by vehicles. It is completely isolated from civilization. There is no electricity, no running water, and no amenities of any kind. It is a sandy island amidst green fields.

The name Al-Ramadna may derive from the Al-Ramadna tribe, who have inhabited this area since ancient times. The Al-Ramadna branch came from the Al-Qararsha tribe, which traces its lineage back to the Quraysh. This is an Arab tribe that settled in the Sinai Peninsula very early on and allied itself with the Al-Sawaleha tribe, one of the oldest Arab tribes to settle in southern Sinai. There are many villages in Sharqia named after the Arab tribes that inhabited them, such as Al-Sama'na, Al-Samakin, Al-Hajjajiya, Al-Sawaleha, and so on.

In this place, you are completely cut off from civilization and modern life. No ambulance, fire truck, or police vehicle can reach you. The patient is taken on a donkey, supported on both sides, until they reach the nearest hospital in the town.

Often, the divine secret has already been revealed long

before their arrival. When you hear that Abu Muhammad has been taken to the hospital, it is considered bad news. It means that the funeral is imminent, within a day or two.

How is security maintained in such isolated areas? And how are disputes resolved? Through tribal councils. Matters are settled by referring to Islamic law in most cases, especially in matters of marriage, divorce, and what is permissible and forbidden, and then to customary law.

The judge or tribal sheikh is usually an elderly man of good character whose judgment is accepted by all. He often rules on blood money in cases of accidental killing and crop damage. The punishment for theft is expulsion from the village and disavowal.

To identify the thief, the suspects sit before the tribal sheikh. The sheikh heats an iron pan in the fire until it is red-hot. He asks each accused person to open their mouth and stick out their tongue.

Then he places the heated pan on the accused's tongue. If he is innocent, the fire will not harm him. If he was guilty, his tongue would burn and he would scream in agony. Among the Sinai tribes, this ordeal is called "al-Basha'a."

There is a scientific explanation for al-Basha'a. It is known

that a thief is agitated and in a bad psychological state. His mouth becomes dry and his throat parched. Therefore, his tongue burns when the ordeal is brought near him.

As for the innocent, his tongue is moistened with saliva, which acts as a barrier, protecting him from burns. It is well known that a wet hand, after being immersed in water, can touch embers or even molten lead without any harm.

We arrived at our friend's house in the middle of the village and found him waiting for us. He greeted us warmly and asked us to convey his greetings to his father. We found the father ill and blind, sitting on a mat in a room opposite the guest room.

We greeted him, and he returned the greeting with a booming voice like a wounded lion. He then addressed my friend, Saeed al-Waziri, asking him about his father. He knew him and used to buy what he needed from him when he went down to the city. Nothing humiliates a person like illness.

We returned to the opposite room and found a plate of molasses, a plate of dried dates, and a plate of sesame seeds. Our friend asked us to eat. When he saw our hesitation, he began to eat himself, taking a date between his fingers, dipping it in the molasses, sprinkling it with

sesame seeds, and putting it in his mouth. We laughed and imitated him.

As the sun set and darkness fell, we went out to the guesthouse, a short walk from our friend's house. We gazed at the narrow village streets and the sprawling fields, bathed in the last light of the setting sun. A refreshing breeze caressed our faces intermittently.

The full moon began to rise on the distant horizon, appearing as a pure white disc. Ibn al-Rumi, in his magnificent poetry, likens it to a thin sheet of bread in its roundness:
"I will never forget a baker I passed, rolling out the dough in the blink of an eye.
Between seeing it as a ball in his hand and seeing it round as the moon."

And when it is a crescent, it appears to us like a gentle smile. Ibn al-Mu'tazz wrote: "
Look at it, like a silver boat, laden with a cargo of amber."

We finally arrived at the guesthouse, a detached country house with a spacious earthen courtyard. A terrace-like structure, accessible by several steps, overlooks the courtyard. It is furnished with mats and lit by kerosene lamps.

We played and ran around in the dim light of the kerosene lamps, mingled with the rising moonlight in the village sky. At the call to evening prayer, we went to a small mosque nearby.

Upon our return, we found the hostess's courtyard covered with mats and several trays placed upon them—four or five, I don't recall exactly. After the evening prayer, the men began arriving, bringing whatever they could of different kinds of food.

One brought a pot of stuffed vegetables and a roasted chicken; another a pot of molokhia and a pot of cooked rice; yet another a fish casserole with sauce; and another a tray of rice pudding and baked bread. Fresh fruits and vegetables, and all the bounty and blessings of the countryside, were also brought.

Each man placed his food on the trays, which were covered with newspaper or cotton cloths. Everyone sat down to eat on the mats, along with their young children.

We sat with them to eat dinner. After dinner, we had sweets with tea, and the adults drank coffee. After that, we continued playing as usual, while the adults continued talking about their own affairs and the problems of

planting, harvesting, and farming.

Most of them were farmers who knew no other trade. I learned from our friend that the villagers did this every Thursday. It was their only opportunity to gather, socialize, and discuss their problems.

You didn't have to bring food to share their meal. Everyone contributed what they could, and everyone took what they needed. The epitome of socialism, the kind of thing books talk about.

We spent the night with our friend Al-Ramadi. In the morning, we had breakfast and then went to the fields. I saw large areas planted with tomatoes that had been left to rot. When I asked him why, he told us that they had found the cost of transporting the tomatoes was greater than the yield, so they decided to leave them as fertilizer.

In the late afternoon, we took the two donkeys, Al-Hasawi and Al-Murafiq, and headed back. We waited for the bus by the sycamore tree to take us back to our town of Fakous. It was a pleasant trip, one that is not hard to forget.

After my friend and companion on this trip, Saeed Al-Waziri, received his preparatory school certificate, he

volunteered for the army to become a sergeant. He kept asking about me and visiting me whenever he was on leave.

He told me once that he was stationed in the Nakhl area in central Sinai. Then he got married and came with his wife to visit us at the family home in Zagazig just before the 1967 war.

After the war, I lost contact with him and never heard from him again. While I was looking through my books, I found a copy of Kalila wa Dimna with a dedication from Saeed Al-Waziri to me in his own handwriting.

I remembered him and the beautiful days we spent together as children, when we used to go to the cinema together. How happy we were to see the films of Anwar Wagdi and Laila Mourad. I wept and wept. May God have mercy on our martyrs.

15

After the 1952 revolution, my father moved to the village of Hehia in the Sharqia Governorate, leaving his job in the grain silos to work in accounting. It was a promotion, but Hehia was far from the modern city of Fakous where we had lived. It remained an agricultural village without electricity, clean water, or a public sewage system.

Most of Hehia's inhabitants were farmers, with only a few government employees. Its streets were unpaved, and its shops were small and few in number. It had one main commercial street called "El-Sikka". The small Railway, and a special train connected it to another village called "El-Ibrahimia".

It was about ten kilometers from Zagazig, the capital of the Sharqia Governorate. The main railway line between Cairo and Mansoura, passed through it, as did a bus route that the farmers called "Santa Croft." To the west, there was a relatively large canal called "El-Bahr", by the locals, and to the east, a small canal paralleled the railway.

Hehia was the origin of our village. I was born there, although I only lived there for a few years. It was the village of my father, my mother, and my wife. It is

one of the oldest villages in Egypt.

Gautier mentioned a village called "Hehou" in his dictionary, stating that it was the name of a district in Lower Egypt, likely the ancient Egyptian name for the town of Hehia, given the similarity between the two names. It is also mentioned in "Tuhfat al-Irshad" as Hehia.

Among its notable figures was the late Khalid Muhammad Khalid, born in the village of Al-Edwa, Hehia district, in June 1920. He was a prominent Islamic scholar and a member of the Supreme Council for Arts and Letters. He also served as Dean of the Institute of Islamic Research. He authored numerous religious books. He passed away on February 29, 1996.

Another notable figure from Hehia was the renowned singer Abdel Halim Hafez, born in the village of Al-Halawat, which was then administratively part of Hehia before becoming part of the Ibrahimia district.

On the few radios available, powered by 12-volt batteries, I would listen to the songs of the revolution as I walked through the village streets: Omm Kalthoum's: "Egypt That Is in My Heart," Laila Murad's: "Unity, Order, and Work,", and Mohamed Qandil's: "Our Country's Radio Is Broadcasting News."

There's also a song by a singer, I think his name was Alish, who sings, in the voice of an Egyptian peasant: “All my life I've worn burlap, I've never taken it off, nor have I eaten a single bite of bread. I planted the wheat myself”

When the revolution abolished titles and fezzes, my father went out into the street with his head uncovered for the first time. I asked him how he felt walking without his fez. He said, "I feel like I'm walking naked in the street." That's how much habit controls us.

The 1952 revolution came, and Egypt was rich with singers, both male and female. Omm Kalthoum was at the peak of her artistic maturity. The most beautiful voice and performance of Omm Kalthoum can be found in the 1950s. Likewise, there were Mohamed Abdel Wahab, Farid al-Atrash, Laila Mourad, Mohamed Fawzi, Abdel Aziz Mahmoud, Karam Mahmoud, and others.

They were supported by a constellation of great poets and songwriters, such as Bayram al-Tunisi, Ahmed Rami, Kamel al-Shennawi, and others. It provides them with melodies, thanks to some of Egypt's greatest composers, such as Mohamed El Qasabgi, Zakaria Ahmed, Riad El Sonbati, Mahmoud El Sherif, Ahmed Sedky, and others.

Music is of immense importance in human life, and in my life in particular. What we cannot express through art, such as sculpture and painting, we express through poetry and words. And what we cannot express through poetry and words, we express through music and melodies. Music, simply put, is a universal language that conveys delicate feelings between people.

It is more than that. Among the people of the Far East—India, China, and neighboring countries—music and religion are inseparable. For the Indians, the source of music lies in mathematics, astrology, and psychology. This is also the foundation of Western music.

In ancient times, music was considered a branch of philosophy. Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle made significant contributions to the world of music.

The ancient Egyptians were deeply interested in music. They invented numerous musical instruments. It suffices to know that they possessed 26 types of drums, not to mention countless wind and string instruments, some of which were mentioned by scholars of the French expedition in their book, "Description of Egypt".

Music was used in temples for prayer and in celebrations and social events. It was also taught to children in their schools as an essential subject for

human progress and advancement.

Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi, studied music as well. Al-Farabi authored "The Great Book of Music," which included the foundations and rules of music.

For Kant, music was "the language of emotions," while for Hegel, it was "a realm in which the depths of the soul and the faculty of understanding are revealed".

Schopenhauer said of music: "The world is nothing but music and melody; it is the hope for humanity's liberation from despair." Nietzsche said: "A world without music is a great and unforgivable mistake".

It is said that when God commanded Moses to water his people, he heard a voice saying, "O Moses, water them." The word "music" came to his ear. From this comes the origin of the word.

The Prophet David used to praise his Lord with the flute, singing psalms and various forms of supplication, known as the Psalms of David.

Orpheus, son of Apollo, whose mother was one of the Muses, the goddesses of poetry and music in ancient Greek mythology, had music that enchanted animals, plants, and inanimate objects. He joined the ship "Argo" and saved it when it encountered

many difficulties.

Most religions say that the origin of creation was a word from God, "Be, and it is." In the beginning, there was the Word. And the Word is sound, or a type of music.

Modern theories say that all forms of energy and the atomic world are composed of particles that are like infinitesimally small musical strings, in the form of closed or open loops, in constant vibration and playing.

The universe is essentially a grand musical composition, in which atoms and all forms of energy we know contribute their diverse melodies.

Music is used in psychotherapy. It aids understanding and learning when the body relaxes and the brain's state shifts from the normal "beta" state to the relaxed "alpha" state.

At this point, the brain can absorb far more information than usual. Certain types of music, such as those by Bach and Mozart, help achieve the "alpha" state. Music also accelerates plant growth and increases animal production.

Therefore, it's no surprise that even a fetus in its mother's womb is influenced by music. Music can shape a person's future if they have a musical

family member.

This was the case with Mozart, whose father was a musician. Beethoven's father was a singer. Omm Kalthoum's father was a religious chanter. Laila Mourad's father was a singer, Zaki Mourad. Ali El Haggar's father was a singer, Ibrahim El Haggar.

My grandfather sat down after the afternoon prayer, listening to the Philips radio, which runs on liquid batteries, as it broadcast a song by Omm Kalthoum. I found him swaying with delight.

When Omm Kalthoum's song ended, it was followed by the singer Abdel Aziz Mahmoud. I found him fidgeting in his seat. Signs of annoyance and worry began to appear on his face.

And when he heard the line: "The moment I see the figure ripe, I remain lost in thought”, my grandpa jumped up to turn off the radio, saying: "This man is talking nonsense".

I disagree with my grandfather's opinion of this beautiful song. The song is the epitome of beauty and exquisite artistic imagery, despite the popular nature of its lyrics. But that's a difference in taste between generations.

That same evening, I found a commotion in the street and people running, so I ran with them to find

out what was happening. At the edge of the village was a rural house with cultivated land in front of it, owned by an old man who was the owner of the house. Right in front of the house was a date palm tree with dates of the finest quality; I think it was the type known as "Amri," which is eaten fresh or dried.

When the dates ripen, the farmer sits on a chair in front of his house, facing the field and the palm tree that stands near the edge of the road. No passerby dares approach the dates that fall from the tree by the wind.

A group of young men, annoyed by this situation, made a bet among themselves to see who could steal dates from this palm while its owner was watching over it at all times.

One of them came at sunset, sneaking through the field's vegetation, placing the trunk of the palm between himself and its owner, who stood guard like a fierce lion. The thief left his shoes and began climbing the palm from the opposite side, careful not to be seen by its owner.

He continued climbing slowly without a ladder, using only his hands and feet, until he reached the dates. He began picking them and stuffing them into the pockets of his robe. While he was busy stealing the dates, his hand suddenly grasped a nest of large red wasps.

The wasps sprang out, fiercely defending their nest and young’s. It began attacking him fiercely, stinging him on his face, head, neck, hands, and legs. The poor man was helpless in his miserable predicament.

He screamed as he scrambled down the palm tree, losing his balance and falling to the ground. Luckily, the land had been recently irrigated, so his fall wasn't fatal. A few fractures here and there, easily treated by a bone-setter.

The old man who owned the palm tree rushed to the thief's aid and carried him to his home. He gave him a drink of water and said reproachfully, "My son, if you wanted dates, you should have told me, and I would have given you what you wanted." The thief, his face swollen from the wasp stings, replied, "Well, uncle, I had a bet with my friends".

Bahana, an old peasant woman, lived with her daughter in a single-story peasant house. Bahana contracted trachoma in both eyes. Her daughter bandaged them.

A Day or two later, the daughter placed a plate of okra in front of her mother at dinnertime. She found her mother after eaten, wetting her hand by dipping it into the okra dish, then using her fingers to moisten her swollen eyelids. The daughter

shouted”: “What are you doing, Mama? What nonsense is this"?

Bahana replied spontaneously, "Well, my eyes are burning, and I found the okra cold and slippery." But, you know, not everything cold and slippery thing is a cure.

It's a story I heard about my grandmother when she was teenager. My grandmother fell ill and was bedridden. When her illness worsened and she was near death, they brought a doctor from the hospital.

After the examination, the doctor scowled and sniffed, clearly concerned about the patient's condition. He rushed out of the house, followed by my grandmother's brother. After they had gone a short distance, he asked the doctor, "What medicine should we give her, Doctor?" The doctor replied curtly and with disgust, "Save your money".

The brother thought to himself, "If I go back and tell them what the doctor said, there will be a huge uproar in the house. What should I do?" He went to a grocer and bought a bottle of lemon-scented soda. He put it in a paper bag and returned home.

"Hey, Muhammad, did you get the medicine?" someone in the house asked him when he returned. "Yes, let's give her the first dose," he replied. Muhammad opened the soda bottle, filled a

spoonful, and put it in his sick sister's mouth, saying, "May God grant you a speedy recovery".

My grandmother opened her eyes after tasting the medicine and said, "What's this? It's soda!" The brother laughed, saying, "You did know it? You'll get better and be well." And indeed, my grandmother recovered from her illness and lived to nearly ninety years old.

I attended a peasant wedding near my grandfather's house. A large courtyard was covered with yellow sand. The celebration began immediately after the evening prayer. The guests sat on the sand in a wide, semi-circle. Inside the circle, a female dancer moved about, performing with cymbals, singing, and collecting money.

The musical band stood to the side; it consisted of a drummer, a flute player, and, if I remember correctly, a rabab player. Most of the songs were rural folk songs, interspersed with some modern songs by Karam Mahmoud, Abdel Ghani El Sayed, and Abdel Aziz Mahmoud.

The bride's dowry consisted of a bed with black posts and a wooden frame, a single cotton mattress, one or two long pillows the width of the bed, and a quilt.

A wooden chest called a "sahara" was used to store

clothes and valuables. There were also a mat and a wooden tray, some copper and earthenware cooking pots, a copper mortar and pestle, a washing basin, a water jug, and a black jug for cleaning oneself.

She also received a necklace and earrings made of genuine gold or gold plating, and in some cases, a silver anklet. New clothes were provided for the bride, along with kohl for the eyes and a porous stone for scrubbing the heels of her feet to remove calluses and dead skin.

I saw the bride, a young peasant girl no more than sixteen, weeping bitterly, terrified of her wedding night. I will never forget the sight of her squatting on the floor in the corner of the room, sobbing, her head in her hands as if she had a headache.

Around her were women dressed in black, like crows, with the midwife in their midst. A truly horrifying and cruel scene. The midwife performs two functions in the countryside: assisting in childbirth and breaking the hymen.

The midwife enters with the groom, most of whom are young and inexperienced in matters of the sexes. The groom's mother and the bride's mother, or their female representatives, also enter.

If the groom fails, as he often does, to break the

hymen with his finger wrapped in a handkerchief, the midwife completes the task. The bride is held tightly by the two women with the midwife; she can do nothing but scream. Another example of the terror that Egyptian women endured due to inherited customs.

After the hymen is broken, the used tissue, still stained with blood, is taken and paraded around the village by the bride's family, proclaiming the girl's untouched honor.

Of course, these are old customs that are beginning to fade away; I believe they no longer exist. Another harmful custom, which I wish would disappear from our country entirely, is female genital mutilation. It has no connection whatsoever to religion or humanity, and while it is now illegal, it is still practiced in villages in Lower and Upper Egypt.

16

In the late 1940s, I went with my father to visit my grandmother, who lived in the village of Hehia. My father worked in the city of Fakous, about 30 kilometers away.

It was midday, a sweltering summer day. We waited for the train on the platform with a small group of farmers, their wives, children, and those seeing them off.

It wasn't considered proper to travel alone without someone to accompany you to the station, to ensure your safety and that you had left the area easily and securely, and that you had found a comfortable seat by the window. The person seeing you off would stand there, chatting and waiting with you.

Among the passengers were those carrying a burlap-covered basket, another a basket with a goose's head peeking out with its orange beak. One woman carried a child on her shoulder or in her belly. A boy clutched the hem of his mother's dress with one hand, and in the other, a dark green cucumber that had fallen to the ground several times. A little girl in a brightly colored dress held her father's hand. The flies were relentless, as were the

street vendors.

The train, which starts in the village of Al-Salihiya and ends in the city of Abu Kabir, passes through five stations in between. It's a newly built local line. The reason for the rumor "The people of Sharqia invited the train", is that when the residents of the village of Ikyad saw the engineers and workers preparing the new railway line, they were very happy and decided to do their duty. So, they slaughtered animals, prepared feasts, and brought out trays of food, placing them on the tracks.

This is where the story of "The people of Sharqia invited the train" originated. They embellished the story, claiming that one of them said, "Should we get him some tobacco to smoke?" Another replied, "My friend, a single cigarette costs a pound."

The train arrived, and we boarded three stations to reach Abu Kabir, the last stop on the line. We waited for the crowded Orient Express, coming from Mansoura and heading to Cairo.

After one stop, we arrived at the village of Hehia. It's actually larger than a village and smaller than a city. It had no electricity, no running water, no sewage system, and not a single paved road.

In front of the train station was a grain mill and rice mill owned by Abu Hamada family, my mother's family. In the small weighing room sat Sheikh Abdul Hamid. He weighed the grain to be milled and, based on the weight, estimated the milling fee:

one piaster, three piasters, or something like that. Sometimes, payment was in kind: three eggs and a potato, a handful of corn, or a bunch of figs.

When the cholera epidemic broke out in the 1940s, and people were falling like autumn leaves, the roads were cut off and transportation ceased for three months. Sheikh Abdul Hamid would look out of the opening in the weighing room and amuse himself by marking each funeral procession in his notebook.

One day, he recorded 30 funerals in a single day and joked about it. The next day, Sheikh Abdul Hamid didn't come to the mill because he was vomiting. A little while later, his own coffin passed by his room, and no one marked his notebook.

One day in the 1930s, an inspector from the Weights and Measures Department came to the mill and examined the scales used for weighing grain to ensure they conformed

to government standards.

He found one of the scales, a "half-ounce" scale, to be slightly underweight. The inspector wrote a report, and a case and a court hearing ensued.

My uncles, the mill owners, couldn't find a lawyer to take the case. They were in a real bind. The judge might order the mill closed or impose a hefty fine they couldn't afford. That's when my uncle Mahmoud, who was just a boy at the time, came along and said, "I'll defend you in this case. Don't worry, we'll win, God willing."

The judge asked, "Well, what's your defense when you've been caught red-handed?"
My uncle Mahmoud replied confidently, "Your Honor, I don't use these scales for buying and selling. I only use them to determine the weight of the grain I'm going to grind. The price of grinning flour isn't set by the government.

If I put a pebble or a rock in place of the missing half-ounce, no one would blame me. And if I doubled or decreased the price, no one would blame me either."

Faced with the soundness of this logic, the judge had no

choice but to acquit him. Unfortunately, this uncle of mine didn't complete his education. My maternal grandfather didn't believe in education because he needed his sons for the business.

In the 1920s, one of the mill workers was named Amin. He was an 18-year-old youth. He stood emptying baskets and sacks into the mill's hopper, so the grain would fall under the rotating millstone. Fine flour would then emerge from a side opening.

At the end of the day, he and his colleagues would hammer and chisel the smooth, soft areas of the millstone's surface to create scratches and cross lines that aided in grinding.

A venerable, elderly, and well-to-do sheikh, dressed in a turban, robe, and caftan, lived nearby. In the countryside, if you were well-off, nothing could stand in the way of your desires and dreams. The sheikh wanted to marry at this age, and his wish was granted without difficulty.

His wife was in the prime of her youth, a queen of beauty. The sheikh housed her in a villa surrounded by a large, lush, and shady garden at the entrance to the village. Up to this point, everything was quite normal in the countryside. But there was one problem. The story goes

that one of the troublemakers from the Abu Atwa family was madly in love with the girl the sheikh had married.

What could he do with the fire of love burning within him, almost driving him to obsession? The sheikh received letters—letters of threat and intimidation, of course. “If you don’t divorce her, I’ll do this and that to you. I’ll give you a month. I’ll give you a week.”

The sheikh, wise from his many years of experience, ignored these letters. When his wife asked him about them, he would reply, “Nothing, it’s just my friends congratulating me.” He thought it was just childish infatuation, that this obsessive man would eventually stop threatening him and calm down.

He didn’t want to report him to the police for fear of scandal and gossip. Many of us would do the same, especially if we lived in the countryside. When the heartbroken lover despaired and his pleas fell on deaf ears with the level-headed sheikh, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

He conspired with three other troublemakers. One of them was Amin, a young man who worked at my grandfather's mill on the millstone. They gave him the knives to sharpen on the millstone, so they would be ready to carry out their

diabolical plan.

On a night as black as soot, the villains found no way to enter the garden except through an irrigation ditch on one side. They crept in one by one. They didn't find a dog howling, because the sheikh considered dogs unclean, preventing angels from entering. But he forgot that they also preventing thieves and murderers from entering.

They entered the villa through the salon window. They looked for the sheikh and his wife and found them fast asleep in their bedroom. They decided to get rid of them both, so that the wife would not confess against them.

After they had slaughtered and stabbed without mercy or respite, amidst muffled screams, gasps, and ragged breaths, and pools of blood staining the bed, they fled.

As they fled, they feared they had failed in their vile mission. So, they sent one of their own, Amin, to confirm the deaths of the two victims, the sheikh and his beautiful wife. Amin returned, entering through the same window they had used to enter and exit.

He went to the bedroom and detected the wife's moans, barely audible, though she was still alive. As for the sheikh, he was dead, a lifeless corpse.

Here, something completely unexpected happened. Something very strange, not part of the plan, and utterly inexplicable. Amin approached the wife and said to her gently, in a low voice so no one would hear, "Don't be afraid. I'll tell them I found you dead." Then he rejoined his wicked companions to reassure them and congratulate them on the success of their diabolical plan.

The rest of the story can be easily deduced. The maid arrived in the morning and found the wife still alive, but in a pitiful state. She ran screaming into the street, pleading for help from passersby. Miraculously, the wife was saved, and the four thugs were arrested.

Three of them were sentenced to death, and Amin was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor. Because, despite his initial involvement in the sheikh's murder and the attempted murder of the wife, his young age and his refusal to kill her upon returning to her had miraculously saved him from the gallows.

If people could be divided into good and evil, we would rid ourselves of the wicked and be done with it. But what can we do when good and evil are intertwined within our souls, minds, hearts, and every cell of our bodies?

A few steps from the mill, to the left of a narrow dirt road, stood a small rural shop. It sold only coffee beans. An old man wearing a robe and turban stood inside. My father stood before the shop and asked for a pound of ground Yemeni coffee.

The man weighed out a pound of green beans and then put them in a charcoal-fired roaster. Then he added cardamom and ground it with a large, hand-operated machine.

Next, we passed green fields on either side of the road. Then a small mud hut on the corner of a narrow alley, on the north side of the road. A coppersmith works there. The shop owner sits on the ground next to a pile of burning coals, blowing on them with a bellows.

He places the copper pot in the coals until the copper turns red. He takes a piece of raw tin and places it on the pot, then, with a large piece of cotton, spreads the tin over the entire surface of the pot. In seconds, it turns from copper to silver.

At the door of the hut, or shop, if you will, stands a mute, white-skinned, red-faced, stocky man in his thirties. He wears a rope around his waist, which he uses to pull up his brown robe to his knees. He wears a tattered cap and

stands barefoot inside a copper pot.

He moves his whole body from side to side, his feet scraping the bottom of the pot, removing rust, old tin, or stubborn grime. Whenever I pass by this mute creature, at any time, summer or winter, I find him inside the pot, moving from side to side, almost like a rock 'n' roll dancer.

I'm reminded of the myth of Sisyphus, as told by Albert Camus, when the gods punished him by forcing him to carry a boulder up a mountain, only to let it fall, forcing him to repeat this tedious task endlessly. I think the mute creature in the pot is even more tedious than Sisyphus and his boulder.

Perhaps the gods, too, were angry with the mute man because he had done nothing in his life to warrant their wrath. For, in that case, they punished him twice: once by depriving him of the gift of hearing, and again by placing him in the cauldron to work like a pendulum for eternity.

How many of us, I wonder, are like Sisyphus or the mute man in our lives? Do we find ourselves forced, for the sake of survival, to descend into a copper cauldron, rocking our hips endlessly from side to side?

My father and I passed several mud-brick houses on our

way. Then we passed my grandfather's house, my mother's father. It was one of the few houses built of brick. My uncle Lotfi lived on the second floor.

One very hot summer night, my uncle woke up after midnight. He went out onto the veranda to get a drink. Earthenware jugs were placed on verandas so that the air would cool the water inside.

My uncle looked out onto the street and saw a man sitting on the doorstep. He couldn't make out his features in the moonlight. When he asked who he was, he learned that he was his friend Mohi the barber, who cut the family's hair. "What are you doing out so late at night?" he asked. He replied that he was waiting for his wife, who was helping some neighbors bake bread. My uncle stayed and chatted with Mohi to keep him company until his wife returned.

Mohi was a man who loved to joke and did strange things without considering the consequences. One day, while walking past a cart carrying crates of tomatoes, a leaf from one of the crates made a cut on his nose. He waited for the wound to heal, but his nose was getting worse.

He remembered a verse by Abu Nuwas: "Leave off your

blame, for blame is temptation, and cure me with that which was the disease." Since the crates of tomatoes had cut his nose, it would only heal with tomatoes.

He took a large, ripe tomato, cut it in half, and tied it to his nose. When it burned, he consoled himself by saying that the tomato would eat away the disease. After two days, his nose had swelled to the size of an orange. Only the health doctor could save him with effective treatment.

While Mohi was talking to my uncle, they spotted two men approaching in the distance, bathed in the moonlight.

"Who are they, Mohi?" my uncle asked.
Mohi replied, "I think it's the reciter Ibn-Ikhwat and Sheikh Mahdi, the Quran teacher."

"What are they doing here at this hour?"
"They were smoking hashish at the Mawlid or drinking Poza, and now they're back, swaying and leaning on each other."

Then a mischievous idea struck Mohi the barber, perfectly suited to his sarcastic nature. He asked my uncle, who was still on the balcony, "Do you want to laugh at them while they're in this state of intoxication?" My uncle eagerly replied, "I'd love to, Mohi."

Next to the house was a small alley. Mohi entered it, lifted his robe, and tucked it over his head to conceal his features. At the same time, he removed his underwear. He waited until they were just a few steps away. Then, he leaped out of the alley in front of them, bouncing through the air and making sounds like farts.

Of course, Ibn-Ikhwat and Sheikh Mahdi hadn't expected anything like this. After walking leisurely, leaning on each other, they suddenly took off running, their backs turning like rockets. They kept running until they reached almost the end of the street.

The cool morning air, which stung their faces, combined with the running and the resulting boost to their blood circulation, seemed to bring them back to their senses. They began to wonder, what was that we saw? Was it a ghost, or just the hallucinations of drinking Poza mixed with hashish? Since they lived near the area, they had no choice but to try again.

After a short while, they returned, walking cautiously this time, their eyes fixed on the spot where the genie had appeared. Holding hands, they took their chances. As soon as they reached the same spot, the genie suddenly reappeared, leaping into the air in front of them. His lower

half was bare, and he made sounds like farts, just like before.

This time, they ran even faster. In the blink of an eye, they were at the end of the street, then vanished. My uncle watched from the balcony, nearly fainting, his heart almost stopping from laughter. He would tell us this story every time he saw us, never tiring of repeating it. That was Egypt in the early 1940s. Simple people, but undoubtedly content with their lives.

My father and I passed by the lupine or termus seller at the end of the street. He wore a pristine white galabeya and a turban. He called out a distinctive cry that still rings in my ears: "Helba and lupine!" He decorated his cart with white earthenware jugs with their shiny brass lids. Cleanly dressed, he seemed to come from a good family; his appearance was different from the other vendors.

Another vendor was selling chicks. He carried them in a sieve on his head, calling out to the peasant women as he displayed his wares, saying, "Only beautiful young girls raise chicks." A chick costs a piaster. If you buy ten, he gives you one or two extras.

Then we find "Zaki the Kerosene Man." A barrel of kerosene mounted on two cart wheels, pulled by a very

miserable donkey. Zaki the Kerosene Man is addicted to alcohol. He's no luckier than his donkey. He sells kerosene to the peasant women for their kerosene lamps, lighting, Primus stoves, and cooking.

After that, we turn left onto the narrow dirt road. We pass a local tailor's shop on the left. Its owner is named Mahmoud, and he's mute. In the middle of the shop is a square table that fills the space and is raised about a foot off the ground. The tailor spreads the fabric on it and sews it while sitting on a cotton cushion.

After that, we pass shops, most of which are closed. This is a grocery store, and this one sell sugarcane. No one walks in the street. Everyone is in the fields working. The women appear every now and then to pour out the washing water in front of the houses. So, we smell soap mixed with dirt all the time.

Then we pass the only church in the village. The sound of its bells is the first sound I heard as a child, before I could walk properly. At the end of the journey, we arrive at my grandmother's house, who is overjoyed to see us. She greets me with hugs and kisses. Thank God for your safe arrival. May God keep you safe.

17

His father, Abdel Moneim, was an army officer, the commander of Lake Qarun. He was married to a daughter of a well-to-do cotton merchant from Giza. The father had four young children: two sons and two daughters. One of them was Adel, the hero of our story.

When the Egyptian Revolution broke out in 1952, and the revolutionaries discovered that Commander Abdel Moneim had been receiving His Majesty King Farouk when he went fishing on Lake Qarun, they coldly dismissed him from service without any compensation or pension.

He was barred from government employment because he was one of the officers of the old regime who had been purged. The man searched tirelessly for honest work that suited his abilities and would allow him to support his small family, but to no avail. Life had become unbearable for him.

He sold his furniture, left his home, and he and his family lived in a single room with one bed and a shared bathroom on the roof. They drank from a shared tap and cooked their meals in a corner of the room.

His wife couldn't bear this miserable life, so she left

him and their children and went to live in her father's house, a merchant. He searched for work in vain. He spent all his money and began living on the charity of his wife's relatives, as his father-in-law had passed away.

This continued for two years. After the intervention of kind people, he found a job as a salesman in one of the branches of the Benzayoun Company, a private clothing and textile retailer, in the city of Fakous, located in the eastern Nile Delta.

Fakous is a large city in the eastern Delta, situated on the edge of the desert. Most of its inhabitants are local merchants or employees from outside the city. Its people are known for their good manners and generosity. It has several large, wealthy families.

It is about 30 kilometers from Zagazig, the capital of the Sharqia Governorate. It has a primary and secondary school that accommodates a large number of boys. There is another school for girls nearby.

The city's streets and the roads leading to it are all unpaved and dirt. The municipality sweeps and sprays them twice a day, in the morning and afternoon. The street sweepers wear galabiyas and carry baskets and brooms. Each broom is a long wooden handle ending in a date palm branch.

A branch is the many fronds that bear dates on a palm tree. Imru' al-Qais, in his poetry, describes his beloved's thick, jet-black hair: "And a frond covering the back, jet-black and thick, like a cluster of dates on a palm tree."

Sprinkling the streets and roads prevents dust from becoming airborne and entering homes and shops. The spraying cart is a large tank mounted on two wheels, similar to those of a horse-drawn cart, pulled by a mule. It has a top opening for filling with water and two horizontal, perforated pipes at the rear for spraying.

The driver sits atop the tank and controls the flow of water. In the summer, children run after the spraying carts to cool off in the refreshing water. Throughout the city, there are large water taps with long hoses to supply the spraying carts with water.

On the banks of the canals, the Poinciana trees stand in rows, their red blossoms blazing and glowing under the summer sun. The sky is a clear blue, punctuated by a few bright white clouds. Breathtaking views that captivate the heart. You won't find them in Switzerland or the most beautiful countries in Europe or America.

Abdel Moneim boarded the train with his wife and children, heading to his new workplace in the city of Fakous, after loading his bed, mattress, Primus

stove, and some cooking utensils into the freight car.

Abdel Moneim took up his new job, and he and his family moved into a two-room ground-floor house. Its door opened onto a small, narrow alleyway, located opposite the apartment where my family and I lived on the second floor.

The alleyway intersected a small, narrow street. On one side, the wall of a mill ran the length of the street, ending at the house of Haj Eid the grocer. On the other side, our apartment began, where we lived on the second floor, above a traditional oven for baking bread. The oven belonged to Haj Helmy, the landlord.

A cluster of one- or two-story houses then formed a row. These houses were inhabited by simple people: a policeman and his family; Omm Hamed, an elderly woman who lived alone and relied on charity and domestic service;

Abu Hamida the barber, his wife, and their young daughter; and a taxi driver married to a beautiful Palestinian woman. Habashi Effendi, an employee at the Credit Bank, lived with his family in one of the apartments on the second floor.

On my way home from school one day, I found a broken clay stove lying in the middle of the street,

discarded from Habashi Effendi's house. Next to it were scattered pieces of charcoal, a broken hookah, and tongs used to smooth the glowing coals.

We don't often encounter such a sight in our daily lives, so we were both curious and somewhat surprised. We began to ask what had happened. It turned out that Brother Habashi, who was indeed of Ethiopian origin, with his dark complexion, short stature, and thin build, had been tempted by some friends to smoke hashish at his house.

Brother Habashi would never have smoked a hashish joint. The idea of holding a hashish-smoking party at home had never even crossed his mind. But he had agreed under pressure from embarrassment and shame, and in the hope of spending a pleasant night in bed.

However, things did not go as planned. It seems that Habashi Effendi was surprised that night by an unpleasant setback and a great disappointment that he had not anticipated. Something had happened to him, something he hadn't experienced since his marriage.

Habashi Effendi, enraged by his failure and lack of abilities, unleashed a furious rage, hurling insults and curses at the accursed Satan and his bad friends, whom he blamed. Then, in his fury, he went

naked to the fireplace, the hookah, and all its accessories, and threw them all from his balcony into the street.

At the end of the street was a local coffee shop owned by Saleh, a man in his thirties, who lived above it with his wife and children. The coffee shop faced the house of Haj Eid the grocer, and a street ran alongside the river in front of them. Both the coffee shop owner and the grocer had appropriated a small garden from the riverbank.

The former used his garden as an extension of his coffee shop and a place to smoke hashish away from the eyes of the police. The latter planted it with fruit trees and flowers. One day, he tied his young nephew, a thief, to one of the trees as punishment for stealing his uncle's money from the shop.

In the middle of a bitterly cold winter night, my entire family, and perhaps the whole street, awoke to the sharp sound of Omm Hamed's voice, piercing the darkness and breaking through the pouring rain. An unforgettable voice: "They killed Saleh, people! They killed Saleh"!

Saleh had been riding in a taxi, loaded with hashish, driven by a chauffeur. Late at night, in the rain, they passed a checkpoint.

When the traffic officer ordered them to stop and

search the vehicle, the driver sped off. The officer fired a single shot from his old Enfield rifle, killing Saleh instantly. He had been sitting in the back seat.

At the far end of the narrow street, on the opposite side, on the corner, is Ahmed Hendam's grocery store. Next to it is a barbershop rented by Abu Hamida.

He's a man in his fifties, overweight, with a protruding belly. He wears a tight yellow military coat over a Western-style robe and a wool cap with two horns, which he pulls down to cover his ears. He has poor eyesight and wears glasses the size of a cup's heel. He feels around on his customer's face to check the length of his beard.

Apparently, the shaving isn't paying off, so Abu Hamida has placed a pot of fava beans on the sidewalk in front of his shop. When you stand in front of him, he gives you a look and asks, "Shave or fava beans"?

Once or twice a month, we hear shouts and screams coming from Abu Hamida's house. Then we hear the siren of an ambulance taking him to the hospital. What happened?

It turns out every time that Abu Hamida had ate what he couldn’t sell of the fava beans, which

caused him indigestion and bloating.

At the entrance to the alleyway, there was a ground-floor house with a courtyard. It was inhabited by Haj Amer and his wife, Hajja Omm al-Azm. Haj Amer and his wife had worked as cook and maid in the palace of one of the old pashas in Cairo.

Haj Amer was tall, nearing ninety years old. His wife walked with a stoop, like the number six in Arabic, and was probably in her eighties. Every year, during the Ashura season, I would find Haj Amer going around to every house in the neighborhood, giving each one a plate of Ashura, cooked with wheat, milk, raisins, and nuts.

Across from Ahmed Hindam's shop was the Ma'mour Mosque. This was the old name of the mosque, unknown to the residents of the neighborhood now. Perhaps it was named so because the Ma'mour of the district collected donations and oversaw its construction, or perhaps he had commissioned it himself.

Its minaret was adorned with electric lights throughout the month of Ramadan. It was a breathtaking sight at night. And the call to prayer from its minaret was recited in the normal voice, without microphones or any disturbance. The mosque's sheikh, Sheikh Ali, was an Al-Azhar

graduate, blind and visually impaired, yet deeply knowledgeable in religious matters.

Next to Saleh's power station was a sesame oil press. A man was tied to the mule's seat to operate the millstone. The area in front of its entrance was darkened by the oil mixed with the street dust. The owner's son was in our school.

The owner had bought the mill located on the other side of the narrow street. The mill was built on an area of at least one feddan (approximately 0.42 hectares), and the purchase price was two thousand pounds at the time.

Adel, the eldest son of Commander Abdel Moneim, was close to my age. He was still in middle school, and I was in high school. I got to know him because we lived next door. Our friendship began in 1955.

He was a handsome, shy, and gentle young boy, tall and slender. My younger brother, his younger brother, and I used to play pole vaulting. Every morning, he would come to my apartment to walk me to school and wait for me to return home with him.

He would arrive and find me still asleep in bed. He would laugh heartily and say, "Is it always you in bed? Can't I ever, even by mistake, find you ready

for school?" My mother, may God have mercy on her, would reply, "Tell him, my son, he's driving me crazy waking me up every day".

We would chat on the way to school. He would tell me about Cairo and its beauty, about his grandfather's family who were merchants in Giza, and about foreign films, which he loved and whose actors and actresses he knew by name.

We would arrive at school to find the gate closed. He would laugh heartily and say, "I swear, no one will ruin my education and my future but you!" Then we would plead with Ragab, the school's doorman, who wore a traditional robe and fez, to open the iron gate so we could go in.

He would say,
"Not you two, especially".
“Why, Ragab, may God not harm you"?
"Because you're late every day".
Then Ragab would give us a lesson on the benefits of waking up early and keeping to schedules.
"Never mind, Ragab, we were up late studying".
"Absolutely not, you won't go in until your parents arrive".
“Ragab, may God guide you".
Finally, Ragab's heart softened, and he opened the gate after making sure the school principal wasn't in the courtyard.

One Eid day, my friend Adel and I decided to go to Zagazig to see a movie there. Fakous Cinema was a single theater that showed black and white Arabic films. In Zagazig, however, there were four theaters at that time that showed foreign films in color.

We took the bus and arrived in Zagazig sometime between late afternoon and sunset. We found the film "The Siege of Troy" showing at Amir Summer Cinema. It was a very long foreign film. The screening ended around 1:00 AM.

We couldn't find transportation to get home at that late hour. It was very cold, so we decided to go to the mosque to sleep until morning. We found Abu Khalil Mosque closed.

We went to the train station and sat on a wooden bench on the platform. After about half an hour, a railway employee came to ask us why we were on the platform when there were no trains at that hour. He told us to leave.

We left the station and wandered through the streets, then returned to the same spot. We found the employee had left the platform. We waited for the first train to Mansoura. We took the train and got off in the city of Hehia. Then we went to my grandfather's house to finish our sleep and eat something.

Adel's father worked as a salesman at the Benzion branch in Fakous. His mother didn't work, as was the case for most housewives at that time. Their income was barely enough to buy plain bread for four people.

I once noticed her asking her son to ration his bread so there would be enough for the rest of the family. Another time, I found her resting her head in her hand, her arm against the window, weeping. Undoubtedly, it was the pangs of homesickness, need, and fear of the future.

This woman used to attend Youssef Wahbi's plays with her husband when he was a commandant in the army. Now she lived as a stranger, unable to feed her children on her husband's meager income. And after attending Omm Kalthoum's live concerts, she now waited for a song to be broadcast from a small radio in the grocer's shop next door.

But fate is merciless and heartless. When the sky rains, it rains heavily and cruelly. Without warning, the husband, a former commandant, was dismissed. Well-meaning people tried to intervene to get him reinstated, but to no avail.

What could the husband do after being fired? He began selling his furniture piece by piece. Then, he had the idea to vacate one of the two rooms he lived in and use it as a daycare center for district

children. "Baba Abdo's Daycare Center".

This continued for several months. During this time, the wife's brother came to visit his sister and her family in their new home. He was not pleased with the family's situation and the life his sister was leading with her husband and children. He advised her to return to Cairo as soon as possible.

The family returned to Cairo. Adel, my friend, did not complete his education, settling for a preparatory school certificate. After a life of hardship and bitter struggle, the father managed to find a job as a clerk in a paper trading company.

At the same time, Adel found a job at Benzion Company in Cairo, the same company from which his father had been dismissed.

Years passed, I graduated from university, and then I got a job at a government institution in Cairo. As I was walking down Al-Alfi Street in Cairo, I saw Adel, my childhood friend, walking on the sidewalk.

He was tall and handsome man, wearing a full suit, his hair styled with Vaseline, and his shoes shiny, as usual. He bore a striking resemblance to Kamal El-Shennawy, but without the mustache.

We were inseparable from that day forward, and our friendship lasted until I left Egypt and emigrated to

the United States. Every year at the beginning of Ramadan, he would come to my apartment in Cairo and invite my brother and me to break our fast at his family's house in Giza. He never missed a single year.

When you talked to him, you couldn't help but feel that you were in the presence of a highly educated and cultured man, despite only having a middle school certificate. I never knew him to lie, break a promise, or gossip about anyone. He was a man of impeccable character in every way.

He went on a work assignment to the city of Suez. There, he met a fair-skinned, blonde, and unmarried woman. Within two weeks, he was married to her. He moved into a small apartment in an old building behind Cairo University, its windows all opening onto skylights.

Unfortunately for him, his wife was a nervous, extremely jealous, and selfish woman. She made his life a living hell, driving him to wander the streets talking to himself. He had no one to confide in but me, his lifelong friend.

I would comfort him, urging him to be patient and control his emotions, especially after the birth of his beautiful baby girl. His wife would get angry, leave their daughter, and go to her uncle's house in Suez after quitting her job.

Then, in late 1969, I emigrated to the United States, leaving him in this state. On my first visit to Egypt, he came to visit me at my brother's house in a Cairo neighborhood.

We sat on the balcony chatting until morning. I noticed a mark on the base of his neck. When I asked him about it, he said he had part of his thyroid gland removed.

On my next visit to Egypt, a year or two later, in the early seventies, I took my younger brother and we went to inquire about him at his workplace at the Benzion Company. We asked the employees, but no one knew where he was.

As we were leaving, a messenger who worked for the company followed us. He asked, "Are you looking for Adel Abdel Moneim?" I replied, "Yes, please." He asked, "Are you his relatives?" I said, "No, we are his friends." He said, "May God grant you long life. He passed away about a year ago. To God we belong and to Him we shall return".

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